

FOLK BY THE SEA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE GREAT HUNGER
THE POWER OF A LIE
THE LAST OF THE VIKINGS
THE EMIGRANTS
OUR KINGDOM
GOD AND WOMAN
THE PRISONER WHO SANG
THE NEW TEMPLE
TREACHEROUS GROUND
LIFE
A PILGRIMAGE

FOLK BY THE SEA

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A LITTLE boat comes shooting along by the rocky coast. Two bare-headed men in their shirt-sleeves sit tugging at the oars, and in the after-part lies a third man, propped against the stern-post. A grey-haired man in a short jacket, with a red-painted fiddle-case in his lap—he lies humming a tune and gazing up into the summer-blue sky, that seems to understand him to-day, and to think as he thinks.

Out on a rock far to seaward stands a little hut, and round it a crowd of ragged children go running and playing while a sickly-looking woman tries to find a little food for them. This man, Lars Vona, had left all this behind him to-day, to go and play at a wedding. He never could say "No" when he was sent for, and people believed that it was because of the drinks, and the fiddler's pence, and the fun and frolic. But they were wrong. He knew that he had his mission. There was so much bitterness and greyness come over the parishes nowadays, and he was the man to get old and young to throw off their burden, to forget bad crops and debts, sin and the Judgment Day. He was no lay-preacher, but he felt himself something of an apostle.

The broad, still fjord lies there warm and windless, a shining mirror, with here and there a streak of blue where a breeze seems laid to sleep. The long whale-back of the westward mountains heaves itself into the sky, sweating away the last snow-wreaths. The world

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is made new again in all this sunshine. And now the boat turns a headland, and the men lie on their oars and gaze up the inner bay that winds eastward toward another parish. They have come from Ervika, on the bare rocky seaboard, but here the heights are shaggy with leaf-woods, and further inland rise high ridges deeply clothed with pine. There is shelter and snugness here. And round the bay lies a hamlet of fishing-huts, grey as the sea—grey as the shingle below—each with its boat-house, and a boat or two lying to-day in the open and oozing out tar in the heat.

And just to-day all the village huts are making holiday. The smoke goes gently up into the air above the roofs, and no one is out at work. It is a little place out by the headland that the men in the boat have their eyes fixed on most, a little old house sunken together under a turf roof. The walls have been battered by many a winter storm, and over the two small windows downstairs there is a single one under the loft. It is as if the house were closing one eye against the western heaven.

"Is that Flata, that place over there?" asks one of the rowers. "Yes, that's Flata!" answers the other.

And at that the third man sits up suddenly, awake and alert. He looks at the sea, the hamlet, and the wooded countryside, and it is as though he would like to lift up his hands in blessing over it all. But the next moment he opens the case, takes out his fiddle, lays it to his cheek, and tunes it. Then he strikes up a dance. The air is so still that the sound spreads wide around. The flocks of sea-birds floating on the bay rise and fly off. The two men at the oars start rowing again, but now with careful, quiet strokes.

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Up at Flata people in their Sunday best come out to look, shading their eyes with their hands.

"Aye, now the fiddler's coming!" they say.

The boat, with its white strake at the water-line, glides up the bay, drawing after it a furrow in the glassy water. The dance-tune comes nearer and nearer. People forget themselves and begin to tramp softly with their feet in time with the measure. That fellow Lars could set the wedding agoing before ever he put foot to land. Children are running about between the huts; from every house, folk come tumbling out; the wedding spirit has caught the whole village.

Early in the spring a thing had happened out here that gave both old and young something to talk about. Peter Norset, the eldest son from one of the big farms up in the dale, came driving one day down to the little croft—to Flata!—and he wasn't out after coalfish or herring; no, he came in style—in a cariole. That was an eye-opener for the neighbours! Even in this out-of-the-way place people knew something about *that* fellow. His mother was a widow, but she still kept the estate in her own hands. There were two pretty daughters, who loved finery, and drew all eyes as they drove up to the church. The younger sons were handy fellows and hard workers; they took on carpentering, blacksmithing, and building jobs, and laid by money in the bank. But Peter, the eldest, who was soon to take over the farm, wandered about the hills shooting, or went round the parishes buying and selling cattle, and no one could keep count of all the girls on the big farms that he had made a fool of in his time. What did the fellow want out here in the fishing-village?

Peter Norset gave his horse in charge to a half-grown boy that came out, and then walked into the grey hut. A tall, lank man in the thirties, with a long nose, and full, dark beard ; he took off his hat, shook hands with the people of the house, and sat down by the door. It was the afternoon meal-time, and everyone, old and young, was at home. Presently Pet, the young lad, came in too, and they all sat and stared at the visitor, as though wondering what he had come for. He soon set the talk going, and showed that he knew a lot, and not mere trifles either. First he spoke of a whirlwind—a cyclone as they call it—and how it had torn away a whole town in America. After that he touched upon politics, and was able to assure them that the Prime Minister, Selmer, was to be impeached,¹ and that meant it would be a bad look-out for the King, too ! It was uncanny to listen to all this ; for in this house the folks were not used to talking about anything much beyond the fishing and the word of God. However, he did not keep them long in suspense, but came quickly to what had brought him. He asked if he could have Anna, the elder daughter, for his wife.

On that there was a silence in the room. The clock did not fall down off the wall, but went on ticking ; the parents and children looked at each other, but mostly at the visitor, while he looked with his light-blue

¹ In May 1883 the members of the Selmer Ministry were impeached before the Risgret (Supreme Court) for having acted contrary to the interests of the country in advising King Oskar on certain burning constitutional questions. After a ten months' trial, the Ministers were convicted and sentenced to pay heavy fines. The controversy ended by the King's yielding the points in issue ; and a Radical Ministry came into power, headed by Johan Sverdrup, the statesman who had led the opposition to victory.

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eyes at all of them, but mostly at Anna. She sat by the window with Martha, the younger sister, and both of them looked as if they wanted to run away. Anna was just twenty ; slender and pale, with a fine, small face and corn-coloured hair ; there was a roguish look about her, and she had a way of singing as she went about her work. Her sister was plump and dark, with brown eyes, and a round ruddy face. Presently she began to nudge Anna. And there, at the end of the long bench, sat the round-shouldered Paal Flata, chewing silently. He had high cheek-bones, and a low, wrinkled forehead, black hair, and a dark beard that circled his face from ear to ear. His upper lip was shaved and a little of the lower, so that the chin was bare, and the cleft in it drew everyone's eyes, it was so deep and round—and so mild, as it were. He was sitting now, casting about for something to say ; he got up from his seat—and then sat down again, chewing all the time. His wife, Lisbet, stood there, tall, lean, and grey ; she had got up to clear the table, but she stood now quite still ; the eyes that gazed from her long face seemed heavy with foreboding. The boy Per had all he could do to keep from giggling. Just think of coming in like this in broad daylight, and starting your courting with everybody listening ! In the chimney-corner sat little Martin, with his fiery red hair and his freckled face. He was only six years old, but if they thought he didn't understand the whole thing——!

"But do you know our daughter then ?" the mother got out at last. Peter sniffed, as was his way, and opined that they were not quite unknown to each other. He had met her for the first time at an auction,

in the winter, and the moment he saw her come into the yard he had said : " Either that girl there or nobody ! " Well, that first time they had had a good deal of talk, and since then they had met, quite by chance, at the village store. And then one or two letters had passed between them . . . and at this point Anna flew out at the door with her sister at her heels.

" But we're only poor folk, we are," said the father at last. To this the wooer's answer was that it wasn't money he was after, but a wife. He would soon be taking over the estate, and if they settled things now it would be just as well if they went to the priest at once and got him to put up the banns. This was going ahead with seven-league boots. Paal chewed and chewed ; and kept getting up and then sitting down again. In the midst of all this uncertainty the suitor took out his pouch and began to fill his pipe, and every now and again he gave his usual sniff.

Out on the kitchen steps sat Anna, with her hands folded in her lap, her eyes far away, and a little smile on her lips. Her head swayed a little ; everything was in such a whirl. Her sister stood by her laughing, but half-scolding too, and shaking her fist :

" You're a nice one, you are, to go and keep a thing like that all to yourself."

Anna did not hear ; she was laughing softly. She had not dared to believe that he was in earnest—but all the same he had really come to-day—to-day ; at last ! How strangely things came about. Both she and her sister had often been gibed at because they never went to dances, and had always kept their doors shut against the young prowlers that went about at night. Their parents were " godly " ; every evening

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there was hymn-singing before they went to bed. And now came the reward. She remembered as she sat there how often there had been bitter need in the house ; food had been scanty ; they ate dripping on their bread for butter and had to grind up burnt potatoes for the coffee-kettle. They had had the bailiff in the house to levy on their things, and once the parents had been charged with a theft from a storehouse where some butter-kegs and cheeses had disappeared. To be sure they were acquitted ; but it had been horrible for them all. The two sisters had grown up without ever having clothes enough for both to go out at the same time ; they had to borrow each other's shoes and dresses. Often and often in her bedtime prayers, Anna had prayed all to herself that things might be made different one day. And now the miracle was come. Though she seemed to sit there, she was really flying. She took parents and sister and brother along with her, and they too flew. The old huts heaved themselves up and flew ; the whole place flew up toward heaven. And she laughed.

He who had come was more than a suitor ; he was a visitant. Before she knew him she had seen him in her dreams : and now as she sat here she hummed softly, and laughed, and she flew—flew.

“Can’t you answer me then ?” cried her sister impatiently.

“Yes, you’re quite right,” replied Anna, smiling, without the least idea what she had been asked.

And then the mother came out to them : “And you could keep a thing like this to yourself ?” she too said. But she spoke gently, stroking Anna’s hair with the back of her hand.

"There was nothing to tell, Mother."

"Oh? What about the letters then?"

"He only wrote that he was well."

"Was that all? But he might have meant something by it." Here both sisters burst out laughing, and the mother had to laugh too.

"And you? What did you write?" asked the mother.

"I? Oh, I never got so far as to put anything together." Anna's face was full of mischief, but her eyes were far away.

"Well, the Lord bless you, child, it's a grand thing for you."

"Then it'll be a grand thing for all of you."

"Oh, don't talk about us. We're only poor folk, we are. But now you must give your answer; he wants to go to the priest this very day. Come along in now."

Later in the day the neighbours saw Peter Norset come out, along with Paal Flata in his Sunday best. While the horse was being put into the shafts, Peter found Anna over in the woodshed, and had a chance for the first time to take her in his arms and give her a kiss. She trembled; but she laughed too, and pulled at his beard. "You that are such a one for the women," she said.

"That's all over," he assured her, looking earnestly in her face. "It is you that have made a new man of me."

"I have something to beg you for," she said.

"Well, beg away."

"You'll be good to my father and mother, won't you—and my brother and sister too? You will,

and the youngster declared that she had seen the Little People herself, in both cow-shed and barn. It was not so easy to get to the bottom of her, though she was as good as the day is long.

And her sister had not an easy time of it. They slept together in the loft, and Anna talked of nothing now but Peter, and Peter, and Peter; while, for the others in the house, it was Anna, Anna, early and late. Not that Martha grudged her sister any of this, but she stole away every now and then and looked at herself in the glass. Just think, if she could get such a prince one day! Oh, no! Of course she was neither good-looking enough nor nice enough—and it ended up with her sitting down with her hands in her lap, moping.

Paal Flata was a short, bandy-legged man, quick in the temper, and just as quick to get tears into his eyes. To be sure he sang hymns in the evening; but when his tantrums came on him, he shook his fists in the air and swore—afterward he would regret it, and fall to drying his eyes again. He had grown bent from much rowing on the sea, and from carrying and dragging on land; he dragged the harrow across the fields with a rope, and carried in the crop on his back, as his father and grandfather had done before him. He was always chewing, and his waistcoat pockets were full of tobacco stalks. It cost about three halfpence a half-pound, and half a pound was a big heap that lasted for weeks on end—it wasn't everyone that could afford cut plug. He was a glutton for work when others set him going, but he never could start upon anything by himself, so the houses tumbled down over his head without his seeing any way to help it. The door to

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the kitchen porch had no proper hinges ; it was hung on withies, so that it groaned and squeaked when it was opened and shut. In the loft the snow sifted in on to the beds in winter, but to be sure it couldn't hurt the children to sneeze a little.

The lad Per was the only son ; he had been confirmed last year. He had such a head for books that his teacher said he was too good for a common fisherman, and it was a pity he couldn't go to the school for non-commissioned officers, where he'd get schooling free. The boy couldn't get this out of his thoughts. But how could he go off and leave his father ? He was the only son. So he stayed on, with the tumble-down huts always before his eyes—he felt ashamed when he had to point them out to strangers, and tell them that was his home. Go away from it all ? No ! But the worst of it was that when his father was in one of his rages, Per wasn't frightened any more. He felt he would like to tell the old man to his face that *he* had nothing to crow about.

The mother, Lisbet, went about, tall and bony, looking helpless, and yet so strangely serene. Many a winter's storm had she come through, but they had never bent her ; they had only made her weather-beaten. She had had a child—a boy—when she was an unmarried girl ; he was grown-up now, and working in the city. The rich farmer's son who had got her into trouble married another girl soon after. And one fine day she was glad enough to take up with a cotter's son, and sit down in his boat and let him row her over to Flata. Then came heavy years. Often she saw the other man in church. And many a time she had to hide away in the outhouse when Paal was

in one of his worst rages. But year followed year. The Lord is strange.

But nowadays she seemed to look far into things, and to see a meaning in every happening. It was clear that, through Anna, all that she had suffered was to be made good again. It was Anna who was to have the rich man's son. Such are the ways of the Lord. She looked out on sky and fjord, mountains and village, and it was as if they pealed forth a song of praise—see how all things work together for good.

But rumours did go about that the bridegroom had some trouble with his family. Old Ingeborg Norset scolded and swore ; the sisters cried ; and the younger brothers threatened to give him a hiding. But, as the eldest son, he had the right to the farm, and so they would have to put up with his bringing home a penniless girl for his wife.

When Anna heard this she flushed a little ; but then she laughed. "I shall be so sweet to them," said she, "that the whole lot of them will soon be pleased as anything."

As for the red-headed Martin, he was all about the place, asking seven times a day if he could go to the wedding. He was the son of Lisbet's brother. His father and mother had died when he was only a year old, and Anna had come rowing home with him after the funeral and said that the boy was hers. "You may say what you like," she said to her parents, "he's going to stay here with us." There was little enough to spare in the house as it was, but Lisbet took the boy on her lap, and, though Paal shook his fists and raged and swore, his eyes soon began to water. The child had slept between them for some years, like one

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of their own, and he learnt to call them father and mother ; so that when the grown-ups said that he was only a foster-son he wasn't foolish enough to believe them. Ah, no ! Nobody could make him believe that these two were not his real parents.

Since he had moved up into the loft, he had often had to stay in bed with a cough. He was pale and puny in his growth ; but he was full of fireworks, and up to every sort of trick. "I'm afraid you'll come to no good when you grow up," Mother Lisbet often said to him. And the wish frequently came to her that he might die now, while he was little ; then at least she would be sure that he would go to the right place. His knees showed through the trousers he ran around in, and the seat was out of them—and he had nothing better : so now he was going all about the hamlet on the sly, asking all his comrades if they couldn't lend him a pair of trousers for the wedding.

When a bride comes to her new home, it is the custom for her to bring a dowry with her ; at least there must be a cow from home, a chest of drawers, bed and bedding, and plenty of clothes of sorts. After the wedding the whole parish will discuss how much she has brought with her, right down to the chemises. (And she ought to be able to cook and bake, to weave, spin, and brew.) The little homestead was turned upside down now over the dowry question. Was Anna to go to her new home like a beggar ?

Paal went about, chewing and storming. "Rubbish !" he said. "If he doesn't want to take the wench as she is, she can stay at home." The truth was that he would have flayed himself to get her the wherewithal to make a show ; but he had never been the

man to find ways and means. This year, for the first time, each of the two sisters had a sheep of her own in the pasture. Now the beasts were fetched in, and one day Per took both the sheep and his sisters in the boat, and sailed them in to the city. Sitting there in front of the mast, and gazing at the fjord, Martha said to her sister : " You'd better take what we get for my sheep too, Anna. You'll need it, and more besides."

Anna couldn't help laughing again. " Don't get into the dumps, old girl. I've got a man already ; and it's you that have to catch a still finer one for yourself at the wedding. So it is you that must rig yourself out."

" Oh, don't talk about me. I'm going to be an old maid."

Anna pursed her lips : " Poor thing ! Are things as bad as all that ? " she jeered.

Even little Martin came home one day with birch twigs to make into whisks for a wedding gift. And after the visit to town Per went off wheeling peat for the neighbours, earning a few pence a day, for he wanted to buy a fine kerchief for the bride. But Lisbet went about racking her brains. There was only one cow and one calf. Impossible to give away the cow, and the calf was too small. Now and again she would make a trip up the kitchen ladder to the loft, and there stand thinking. The loft ran the whole length of the house. Over the kitchen it was a larder, with a barrel of flour on the floor, a smoked ham hung on a rafter, and a pot of boot-grease in a corner. The greyish-black brick chimney went up through the roof. All round the walls of the part above the living-room stood the beds, and over them hung a few of the best

clothes. On the floor a couple of milk pans usually stood, collecting thick cream and also dust. Once in a while a mouse would fall in and get drowned. Against the wall at the farther end stood a chest of drawers, red-painted and with green pillars at the corners. She had brought it with her when she came as a bride. It was the one thing she had to remind her of better days.

The end of it all was that Elias Daber came one day to paint up both the chest of drawers and the bed that little Martin had slept in. The little fellow was given a box instead to lie in, and he thought this great fun. "Now I'll sail to town," said he; "this is a boat, you see!"

When Peter Norset came to fetch his bride, sure enough he came in a wagon. And there were the chest of drawers and the bed to load it with, both looking brand-new; and no one could see that the bedclothes had been in use.

"She has no cow, God help us!" sighed Mother Lisbet, and the old man chewed and stumped about.

"We have thirty cows at Norset," the bridegroom told her consolingly, with his usual sniff.

But when Anna sat on the cart, laughing and wiping away her tears at parting, the mother came out with a little brass breastpin and fastened it under her chin. "This is all I have," she said; "but I wore it myself the day I was a bride."

Her daughter flung her arms about her neck; then sprang down from the cart again and ran off to the out-house; up into the barn; down to the cow-house and into the woodshed, bidding farewell to them all. "Oh! What about the cat?" she said. But she had

no need to search for that. The grey striped tabby rubbed herself around their legs and miaowed ; she understood that great things were afoot. Anna took her up in her arms and stroked her : " Poor pussy ; good-bye to you, too."

Mother and father, sister and brother, all went with the cart as far as the highroad ; and at the gate they stopped, looking after Anna, gone away now for good. Little Martin climbed upon the fence and gazed after her—Anna had always been the one to take his part when he had been up to mischief. They looked after the little, pale face that turned again and again to look at them and smile ; but again and again her hand was up at her eyes. All about the hamlet people stood and looked up at them, and called out their farewells. She had belonged out here among the fisherfolk all her life. And now : " Anna is going away," they said. And it seemed most strange to them.

The wedding was to be a week after, and of course invitations came both to Flata and to the neighbours around. But for Lisbet and Paal the worst trouble was still to come. They must have a gift for the bridal couple that wouldn't put them to shame. There was no way of getting round the wedding gift, for on the third day it would be called out as at an auction. Paal forgot both hymn-book and prayer-book, and stumped about and swore. He would much rather not go to the wedding. What the devil would he be doing sitting up there like a tramp amongst all the big folk !

" The Lord will provide a way," hoped Lisbet. She was thinking of the four sheep they had out at graze.

One day Per rowed out across the bay, shining in summer light, and in the middle of the fjord he rested

upon his oars and waited. Then came the steamer from the city, with a trail of smoke streaming out into the air. It stopped, and down into the little boat climbed a smart townsman, and after him came two leather bags with shining brass mountings. "Good-day, Per!" said he. And when the steamer churned on her way he swept off his straw hat, and made a deep bow to the captain up on the bridge, who waved in reply and called out, "Good-bye, Mr. Knutsen!"

"Good-bye, good-bye, Captain!"

What a bow this man could make! And it wasn't everyone that could get a steamer to stop just so that he could get out exactly where it suited him. Per began to row back, and the townsman sat down in the stern of the boat.

It was Gjert Knutsen, the half-brother; the son who had come before Mother Lisbet's marriage. He began as a stable-boy at a big hotel in the city; then he became a coachman, and wore gold on his cap; then a waiter, and, at last, head waiter. No doubt about it, he got no end of money from all the grand travellers that came round; he was a swell himself now, and when he came on a visit he had gifts with him for one and all. Per had a silver chain about his neck, and a silver watch in his pocket; he got those at his confirmation last year. In his elegant city speech Gjert asked: "And how is Mother?"

"Oh, aye! We've had a hustle lately!" was the answer.

"Well, so we're all to go off to a wedding, Per?"

"Aye; that's the way it looks!" answered the boy happily.

Per rowed, but he couldn't look enough at his

brother. The blue suit; the gold chain across the waistcoat! Oh, aye! Collar and cuffs as white as snow; hands so fine and clean, and boots that shone. Oh, to be able to go out into the world and climb so high. No such luck for Per. He was doomed to stay at home, and to be a fisher and a slave all his days. Still he felt proud when he heard people say that the two brothers were like each other. It's true that both had their mother's fair, curling hair, long face, and big eyes. But Gjert Knutsen's hair was golden, and he wore it brushed back, so that it stood out like a halo under his hat.

There he sat looking about him in high good humour, and asking after friends and acquaintances. He, too, was a boy at Flata once upon a time, and used to row about when his stepfather was out line-fishing or with the nets. He remembered all the different bearings for the fishing-grounds, and he looked about him, picking them up again. Get the little cleft in the blue mountain far to the south just clear of Vikanes, and the bare eastern hilltop right over Elias Daber's little hut, and where these two lines cross you'll find cod. As they rowed up the bay, there were more and more such bearings, showing fishing-grounds almost everywhere. The hamlet, with all its little huts, glided nearer and nearer. Ah, to be home!

A girl in a light blouse and a red skirt ran down to the beach, and right after a little red-haired boy came flying. No one but Martha could stand like that with her hands on her hips at a time when she had more to do than she could manage.

"Why, here you are. Good day and welcome," she cried.

The man in the stern waved his straw hat : " Hallo, lassie !—why can't you get married too at the same time ? Then we could kill two birds with one stone."

Then he came carrying his fine bags, and Per hadn't enough sense to take them from him. Martha did not dare to throw her arms around Gjert's neck, he was far too grand, and, besides, the people in the other huts were staring. But she took one of the bags to help him. Per stumped after, not realising that he was a perfect looby not to have taken the bags long ago. Martin danced round them all, wild to know whether there was a present from town for him this time. He had been promised the loan of a pair of trousers from a friend ; jacket and vest he had—but no cap to wear at the wedding ; and if he couldn't get hold of one he'd have to stay at home.

It was odd to see the spick and span young fellow from the city walk into the fisher-hut. " Lord bless me ! But it's cosy here ! " he said, before even saying how do you do.

The hut had been swept and scoured and the floor strewn with juniper ; it smelled just as it should, of home and festival. He gave a delicate hand to his mother and father in greeting, bowing just as low as he did to the captain, but laughing and joking all the time. " You get younger every time I see you, Mother," said he. " You're sure it isn't *you* who are getting married ? And you, Father, you look like a bridegroom yourself."

They didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Then he began wandering about the room, asking a dozen things at once ; not waiting for the answer, but asking something else ; rubbing his hands together, and

beaming with pleasure at being home again. "And how's Oppel-Ellen? And old lame Marja? And Per Sjusovar? I say, Father, do you remember that time when Setermyr got a whole boatful of coalfish, and we didn't even get a bite? And that time when Mikkel the shoemaker fooled me into hanging out a line for small fish between the cow-shed and the house-eaves, and that poor unfortunate hen that took the bait!" So strange it was to hear a fine gentleman like that telling stories about the poor little place, that one couldn't help sitting down and laughing. He wound up the weights on the wall clock and asked: "And how goes it with you, Old Fellow?" He swore a little, easily and lightly, just as if he had leave to swear from Him who governs all; not the same thing at all as when the devil gets into Paal and he swears the air blue all round him! They looked at the white waistcoat; it surely must be of silk; they mustn't go too near it. All at once he jumped up, shining boots and all. "By jingo! I believe you are saying *De* to me instead of *du*. All right, I'll have my revenge. I'll call you 'Bathsheba,' Mother, and you, Father, 'King David.' "

The father shook his head, and the mother sat in a daze; the young folks shrieked with laughter, and Martin flung the cat up into the air.

The big bags were opened; and now there was a solemn silence. Oh, aye! Here were parcels of sugar and coffee for Mother, and then a black silk shawl, patterned with dark red flowers. He laid it carefully over her shoulders and said, "For the bride-to-be!" And she—she fingered it gently, looking down at herself; and then fairly broke down and cried. Stuff for

a dress for Martha ; fine, light summery stuff ; she stood with it in her hand, lost in wonderment. A big cake of tobacco for Father ; Paal was dumbfounded just for a moment, then he cleared the tobacco stalks from his mouth, unwrapped the blue paper from the cake, and bit off a generous chew. A beatific look spread over the weather-beaten face ; it was as if the mouth were closing over some sweet secret. Then came a fine big shirt-front, with collar and tie, for Per. "I suppose you've begun to have an eye for the girls now ! " said Gjert.

At last he turned to the young rascal with the red hair and the eager, freckled face. "Oh ! And I forgot you ! " he said. "That's the very——" His face was suddenly crestfallen ; he looked down. The boy stood silent ; a lump rose in his throat—better be off, he thought ! "Oh ! But wait a bit ! " the townsman cried out, smiting his forehead. Then he fished up yet another packet, and tore off the wrapper. A blue cap with a shining peak and a silver horse for a crest, no less.

"It was meant for the Sheriff," he said, "and I suppose it'll be too small for *you*, Martin." He crammed the cap down over the youngster's head. "Oh, my Gjert ! my Gjert !" whispered the mother. The boy's face grew scarlet ; he took the cap between his hands, and gazed at it as if it were a star. He forgot his thanks, and rushed out and over the whole village, to show the cap to his friends.

Gjert Knutsen had thrown the things around as if they were mere nothings. But the family stood about looking so dazed, that he thought he must do something to wake them up.

"By the way," he said, as if the thought had just come to him, "you and Father will have to give a pretty good wedding present."

"Yes, Lord help us!" sighed the mother, and the old man began shuffling about restlessly.

"Would a guinea be enough?" Gjert asked.

They all gazed at him in silence.

"Oh, good gracious!" whispered Mother Lisbet. Now the sheep may be saved, she thought.

"Here you are, then!" he said, pulling out the two notes, and Paal Flata falls to dancing a little jig and waving his arms about.

But Gjert Knutsen couldn't stay long in the house. Out he went and stood bareheaded under the sky, so great and widestretched. Everything in the hamlet had a familiar face. The banks of sward round Flata were a carpet of red and yellow blossoms, and all about him there was the smell of the sea, and a whiff of salt herring from the kitchen porch. "Good day!" it all said to him. Up he must go to the little barn that gets smaller every time he sees it. Many a winter morning had he stood there with his stepfather threshing. Thump! thump! thump! fell the measured beats. Then he must go down to the cow-shed. Oh, yes, the two stalls and the bins, just the same as before! And he remembered the winter evenings he had gone with his mother when she came out here to milk. "Tupp! tupp!" went the milk, falling into the pail. Strange to see it all again. Afterwards, he went striding with his long legs over the pasture toward their neighbour Sivert Rönningen's place. The wife there, Inga, had been in the same confirmation class with him, and one autumn evening, when the

young people had all got together, these two had sat apart behind a bush, while the others were skylarking and paying no attention. Not that it came to anything ; but it is a little memory to think of and play with away in the city.

"Dare say your sweetheart's sitting waiting for you," said a voice behind him—and Martha came hurtying past on her way to the village.

"Are you off to America, girl?" he called.

"No! To the seamstress—just think if she could get my dress made by to-morrow. She would have to sit up all night, but—" and off she runs with her skirts flapping.

Gjert stayed chatting a while with Inga. She was an oldish woman already, bearing the marks of hard work and many childbeds. But that was nothing to him ; he saw her as she was—that other time. But now she was tall and vigorous ; there was a warm pallor over her clear-cut face. This time, as always, he had brought a little present for her. She laughed at his flighty talk, but when she looked at him it was through eyes a little narrowed. Perhaps his coming made a little holy day in her everyday humdrum life.

On the way back he had before his eyes the grey, rickety huts that were his mother's and father's place. Some day, naturally, he must come and pull it all down and build it up anew. Yet he couldn't help liking it just as it was. A home is home, however tumble-down it may be.

It was a great event for the young people, seeing this fine gentleman from the city undress with them in the loft, and throw himself in his fine starched shirt between the sheepskin covers.

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"Does Mother still catch mice in the milk?" he asked, and they all went off into shouts of laughter.

The next day Per looked in through the house door. "The fiddler's coming!" he cried.

Out they rushed, young and old together. There came the boat, gliding up the shining bay, and, sure enough, there sat Lars Vona playing a dance already!

The boat came to land, and Gjert went down with a bottle to treat the men. The boatmen had to turn about to go back again at once. They had rowed the ten miles for a drink.

But Lars Vona, with his fair, curly beard, was up on the grassy slope already, taking a look around. He had grown up here amid these softly wooded hills. Fate had stranded him on the grey naked rocks of the sea-coast; but now he stood here and breathed after a new fashion, as he turned his head, and called the wide skies and the leafy hillsides to witness that he was still the same Lars Vona he had been of old.

Norset lay twenty long miles away, so the folks would have to drive. Both Paal Flata and the neighbours were agreed that an ordinary hay-cart was good enough for the trip—it had room for so many. And later in the day three wagon-loads of wedding guests drove through the hamlet and away. Barefooted children ran ahead and behind and round about them; they could go along some of the way at any rate. But Martin sat up on one of the carts, wearing his new cap, and looking condescendingly down on the escort. He was going to the wedding feast.

Of course that fellow Knutsen could have treated himself to a fine horse and carriage if he had cared to, and gone in style; but it was really much better fun

II

LAME MARJA stumped about with a crutch under one arm, an old woman with a sunken mouth and a bristly growth on her chin. She had had two daughters, but they did not share the same father. Now, in her old age, she hobbled around the district carrying the latest tittle-tattle, and got money enough from the Relief Officer to keep her in coffee and tobacco.

To-day she started off for the church ; and sure enough, in the fine summer weather, folk were setting out from every house and hut "to see the bride." A crowd of people flocked around the churchyard—big folk and little folk.

"There they be!" cried a voice.

Far in where the big farms lay they could see a cloud of dust going up from the road, and soon it grew to be a long moving line. One, two—over twenty horses were counted. Now they were coming up the last hills ; far in the distance men could be heard yelling and halloing. The horses were in a lather after the twenty-mile drive, but with a great cracking of whips they dashed up at a trot or a gallop.

In the first carriage sat Lars Vona with his clarinet, and a dalesman in a red stocking-cap with a fiddle, both of them playing till the sweat ran down. After them came the bridal pair ; then the old lady from Norset ; next the bride's parents ; and then a long train, following according to rank and kinship. The dalesmen all in wadmal just as if it were midwinter ;

some wearing fur caps, and with woollen scarves about their necks ; and as drinks had been served at every three-mile post, there were plenty of red faces and shouting and singing. Among them sat one who stood out from the rest of the company—a patriarch with white hair and a short beard, and a real Sunday face. This was Helge Skau, the foremost man in the dale. The womenfolk were buxom, giving token of fruitfulness and good harvests. They sat in the carriages with their heads nodding, the most of them in black silk kerchiefs and shawls.

In the big yard at Lindegaard there is a throng of people and horses, and in the midst stands the bride, with a wreath on her corn-coloured hair. She looks about her, standing there all alone. They are all so busy with their own affairs. What has become of Mother ? Her face looks even smaller than usual. For it's not easy to be happy with so many eyes pelt-ing you with their glances. At last she catches sight of some friends from the fishing-village ; they have taken refuge on the bridge leading up to one of the barns ; there they stand, staring about them ; and to them she nods and smiles.

The church bells begin to ring, and Peter Norset comes and takes the bride by the hand to lead her away. He throws back his head, and looks about him, as if he would show her off to the crowd. No doubt the drinks he took on the way have told on him, for he does a foolish thing : “ Aye, girls, now you can have anyone you like ! ” he cries to a crowd of girls from some of the big farms. “ I've got a lass worth

the lot of you put together." Some of them try to laugh. But the slight was never forgotten.

Then he leads off with the bride; and the others follow in couples. The girls' faces are flushed, and their lips pressed tight. The menfolk mutter and clench their fists by their sides; if it were not for Ingeborg Norset they would go straight off home. The greybeard Helge Skau looks thunderous; he stamps along heavily; his daughter must be very near crying now—it had not been so easy to get her to come at all! But the church fills up; when, at last, Lame Marja manages to hobble up, it is quite full already; the precentor is singing, and the bridal pair standing at the altar.

Marja sits down where she can see all that is going on; her lips pinched in yet further as if to keep back a jeer. There stands the bridegroom—swaggering there with his two buttons on the back of his coat; and the bride hanging close to him—she can't be more of a peacock than she was before. Those two Flata hussies were by way of being so holy, barring their door at night, just as if the men round about weren't good enough for them! The sister's sitting there now, fancying no doubt that she'll get a priest or a sheriff! But it's the offering Lame Marja looks forward to most; for that goes in order of rank and position; and it'll be a thing to chuckle over to see Lisbet and Paal filing past amongst the big folks.

Now the marriage service is over. The priest turns toward the altar as if in prayer; the bridal couple go round and place their offerings on the altar cloth; first for the priest, and then for the precentor, who is singing all the time for dear life. After them comes the

bridegroom's mother, little and limping, with a hard, set face: then follows Ola, the second son, a red-headed youth with light eyebrows and gold rings in his ears. Now it is the Flata folk's turn. Lame Marja has to put her hand up to her mouth to stifle a giggle. At this moment she is certain that it must have been those two, after all, who broke into the storehouse at Skaret and stole the butter and cheese. They to let on to have money and put down something for both priest and precentor! Is it twenty pounds or a penny for tobacco stalks? They look as if they belonged among the big folks, don't they! Then comes a long train of couples, filing past and making their offerings in order of rank. Why, there's that upstart from the city, Gjert Knutsen, making his offering along with the bridegroom's sister, pretty, rosy-cheeked Jonetta, who seems to float past in her blue dress.

At last the bridal pair are out in the porch to shake hands with all the relations and be congratulated. There is no way out of it, the old lady from Norset must go up and wish them happiness. And now it's the turn of the great folk from Flata! Lame Marja stands where she can keep an eye on the whole thing. Oh, aye! Those two may very well wish the bridegroom luck on his making such a rich match. But the dalesfolk stand apart looking as if they wanted to be off.

Not until all the carriages had driven away behind the fiddlers did Lame Marja hobble back toward the hamlet again. She was filled full with news. Enough to last for a year and a day. But every now and again she had to stop and spit.

The long bridal train drove back through the countryside ; along the lake, darkened to blue by the summer breeze ; past the farms that lay on the green slopes around it, sending smoke-wreaths up into the air ; and so onward to the channel connecting sea and fjord. Here the bridge was broken, and they had to cross by ferry. It all took time ; the horses were frantic before they reached land ; the womenfolk shrieked ; little Martin's borrowed trousers were well splashed, and he began to cry. But the bride said that he might sit in her lap when they got into the gig again, and that consoled him.

Then on they went, through the richest part of the farming country, where, here and there, a farm had hoisted a flag, chiefly for the sake of Ingeborg Norset. At last the dale opened up before them, with blue mountains on either side, pine-clad ridges and farmsteads. Grass-covered fields rose up steeply from the river, and long farmsteadings looked down from the hillsides. Here and there a horse in tether ran round and round with head held high, whinnying after the procession.

At every three-mile post the party had to stop to give the horses a rest ; and drinks were handed round again to old and young. Each time the bridegroom stood there with his black-bearded head thrown back, holding the bride by the hand, as if to show her off to the company. He could hear muttered taunts on all sides ; sullen glances came from the men, and the girls were almost weeping with rage. But he murmured to his bride that she must not mind ; all this was exactly as he would have it be. When they reached Skau, Helge turned in to the farm, determined to go no

journey, but they were whipped again into trot and gallop as they breasted the hill to the farm. The players had saved up their sauciest march for this moment, and, as the train approached the palings round the garden in front of the house, a scattering volley of loud reports came from the hillside above the farm. It was a welcoming salute from the cotters of Norset.

III

After all, it turned out to be the regular big farmer's wedding, with long tables laid down three rooms, and food and drinks, and dancing day and night through. The food even was not like town fare, but bread, cream-porridge, boiled bacon and meat, cheese on cakes, and strong, home-brewed ale in flowered bowls. The dancing tamed them all, young and old, so that the bridegroom was left in peace, though the constant dram-drinking made him ready enough for a quarrel. It was strange, when Lars Vena really began to make his fiddle speak, to see old men of sixty swishing up to old women, mothers of ten, and grabbing and swinging them around. They might once have been sweethearts—a generation ago, but what of that? Memory lives on though the years pass.

The first day and night Li-het and Paul stood apart and looked on. Assuredly dancing was a sin, and where could Anna and Martha and Per have learnt to dance? For there they were, whirling round with the best of them—did ever anyone see the like? Much good it seems to do to sing hymns every night and keep the children to God's Word. There they stood, these two poor folks, without realising in the least that they were laughing and enjoying it all in spite of themselves. Yet they were a little apart from the rest of the company. The dalesfolk kept away from them; the Flata people were not good enough for them, it seemed. But, luckily, Elias Daber, their neighbour

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down there by the sea, was standing near by, and, all of a sudden, a fit of devilment took hold of him—he dragged Mother Lisbet out on to the floor, and, before she knew where she was, she was dancing a hop-waltz with her skirts swirling about her. A good thing indeed that the Lord is merciful.

Armed with bottles and glasses, people sat out on the bridges up to the barns,¹ or behind the house-walls, drinking to one another. The sun rose and the sun set again, and at last, one after another, they began to fall asleep ; night-time or daytime, it was all the same ; they slept where they lay ; in a barn, or on the floor of a loft. But they were soon on their feet again and fortified with coffee and food ; and drinking and jollification went on all the time. For every second dancee Lars Vona was given a penny or two by all the men that were not skinflints ; he soon had his pockets full of coppers—well if he could have saved it all till he got back home to his hut on the rocks, and his flock of children ; but it's not often that money made by fiddling comes with a blessing. At last he fell asleep in a corner, still holding on to his fiddle, and a lad from the dale took it from him, and struck up a dance. It was the same fiddle, but not the same fiddler ; soon the people stopped in the middle of their dance, swearing that Lars must wake up again ; and at last they wakened him.

There was no doubt about it that Gjert Knutsen knew how to twirl a girl around ; and the heavy dales-men looked at him through half-closed eyes, and

¹ Barns are invariably raised a story above the ground, being made accessible to wagons by a wooden inclined plane, called the “barn-bridge.”

scarcely knew what to make of him. He was neither doctor nor priest, merchant nor lay-preacher ; yet he swaggered about, got up like gentry. But clothes don't count for much ; after all, he was only a cötter's son, and they were not best pleased that their daughters should purr so sweetly when he took hold of them. Jonetta, the youngest sister of the bridegroom, was the worst of the lot ; although she had a sweetheart there, she hung after Gjert early and late. But one evening, when the pair were setting out for a trip up toward the woods, the brother with the ear-rings, who had kept his eye upon them, ran after.

"*Jonetta !*" he called after them, "*you'll be good enough to come back !*"

The bridegroom went round amusing himself royally by vexing the old men of the dale. He would pat their shoulders, and console them by saying that their daughters might quite well get husbands after all. They turned round after him with a jeering laugh ; but they had no answer for him. The Master of the Ceremonies had brought a bowl of punch for them into a side-room, and here they sat, talking in low tones. Presently the bridegroom came out to them and sat down. "*I suppose you are glad now,*" he said. "*Selmer will soon be convicted and sentenced, you know, and it'll be a bad look-out for reactionaries in this land. It won't be plain sailing for you landlords either.*"

Peter Norset took a Radical paper and read history-books ; it was not easy to shut his mouth.

"*How about yourself ?*" asked the old man from Skau. "*Aren't you meaning to be landlord at Norset here ?*"

"I? Why, the first thing I shall do will be to let our cotters off from their covenants."

A sudden buzz went round the table.

"So?" remarked the greybeard from Skau. "And maybe you'd have the rest of us too give away the half of our manors."

"Well, you know very well it's the cotters that have tilled them and worked them up," said the bridegroom.

They glared at him, but he only laughed and went off.

One person who was busy all the time was little Martin. For one thing, the faces of the grown-up men grew so queer as time went on and they continued drinking; and then he had to keep an eye on the bride and see that no one interfered with her. Then they let him ride on the horses out on the pasture, when the stable-boy took them to the river to water. And then, when he set out in earnest to find out how many rooms there were in the farmhouse, he came upon a little loft over the servants' hall, and here, strangely enough, were Gjert Knutsen and the pretty Jonetta lying on a bed. The girl hid her head, but Gjert lifted up her chin and said, "Heigh, Martin!—Now I'll show you how to treat a girl!" And he gave Jonetta a smacking kiss right on the lips. The boy felt bashful and took to his heels. Outside, he came on the old lady of Norset, standing on the storhouse steps with a stick in her hand and looking about her. When she caught sight of Martin she called out, "Hi there, boy! Have you seen our Jonetta anywhere about?" But, little as he was, he knew enough not to tell.

The old people from Flata came across one another behind a house-wall, and agreed to go for a little stroll together. It was long since they had had so much time on their hands. So they walked, the pair of them, side by side down the road. Paal had managed to shave himself; the cleft in his chin looked milder than ever, and, with a good chew of tobacco in his mouth, his whole face shone like a sun. Lisbet was wearing the black shawl with the flower pattern, and as they walked, her head leaned over a little toward Paal. They talked of this and that, looking straight ahead. Well, well—times are as they are. And now Anna will be housewife at a place like Norset. Strange how things happen. Aye; you may well say so.... Her face was careful and serious, and he stepped so neatly and heedfully one could see he was actually out taking a walk.

Some young people from the hamlet passed; they were friends of the bride; and for them, too, there was no mixing with the grand folks. If a cotter asked a dale girl for a dance, she refused, and the cotters' girls had to sit out. But toward evening, on the second day, a boy came rushing into one of the rooms, crying, "Herc, do come over to the north hill!" and rushed out again.

The people all streamed after him to a place where some young cotters, lusty Lofoten fishermen, had gone off by themselves to while away the time in their own fashion. One of them lay face downward with an iron pot turned upside down over his behind; another held an iron crowbar down upon it, while two others, armed with clubs, hammered on the crowbar as if it were a blasting-rod, singing with the solemnest faces:

" 'O hoppen O hic,' quoth he,
 'O you and you and I,' quoth he.
 'Now goes he; now goes he;
 O you and you and I,' quoth he."

The folks gathered around them, and stood there, doubled up with laughter, but the "miners" kept on and took not the least notice of them.

That same evening a white-bearded old man came driving in a broad hay-cart. It was Kunt Ringstad his own self. Everybody knew that he had answered with a downright "No" when he had been invited; but here he was all the same, and it was clear that he came riding on a hay-cart on purpose to besmame the wedding. The bridegroom and the Master of the Ceremonies went out to ask him in, but he pretended not to see them, and merely asked for Olaf Dyrendal. He was directed to the servants' house where Olaf was sitting drinking, and there the greybeard went when he had tied up his horse. He was a broad-shouldered, fat man with groins bulging with rupture; the seat of his grey wadmal trousers hung loosely down behind him, and they were fastened in front with brass buttons. His hair hung in long curls from under the wide, brown plush hat; his white beard, too, was brown about the mouth with tobacco-juice. He found Olaf Dyrendal, and the two old men shook hands and sat down, one on each side of the table. They looked at one another for some little while.

"Out driving?" inquired Olaf at last.

"Yes—there's a thing I had to see you about."

They stared at one another with red, bleary eyes, then, all at once, Ringstad banged the table with his

and their wedding—he didn't give a curse for them.

The third day came the presentation of the bridal gifts. There sat the bridal couple in the high seat ; the room was crowded with people, and the Master of Ceremonies beat with a hammer on a roof-beam and called out : "Your pardon, good people ! Here we meet an honourable person, Widow Ingeborg Larsdatter Norset. She presents to the bridal pair, as a wedding offering, a horse, a goat, a cow, a sheep. And many thanks to her, and a dram to drink their health !" Then the bridal couple got up and went over to thank the old lady ; but she did not look at the bride when she gave her hand. When they had returned to the high seat again, the Master of Ceremonies knocked once more on the beam, and this time he announced *two* honourable persons : Cotter Paal Johnsen Flata, and his wife, Lisbet Hansdatter of the same place. Here the people began to snigger. But the Flata folk gave a guinea for a wedding offering, and there was nothing to be said against that, so they were offered thanks and drinks, and nobody sniggered any more. This time the money was put into the gift-bowl and placed in front of the bridal pair. And now came a long procession of gift-makers ; the bowl filled up, and there were drinks and thanks for all. But little Martin stood by, and never dared to tell the Master of Ceremonies that he had brought a present of whisks.

At last came the fourth day of the wedding, when the young folks had to sit on a block and be the butt of the guests. The chopping-block was carried in from the woodshed, and set up in the middle of the floor. The people packed closely about it, and those that couldn't get into the room hung in through the

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open windows. Their faces were tense, for more than a few of them had been stringing rhymes together for a long time past against the day when Peter Norset should marry at last and come to sit on the block.

Then Peter entered with his bride ; he sat down on the stump, and took Anna on his knee. She was pale and worn out for want of sleep, and looked about her with frightened eyes ; she knew that she might expect to have a bad time of it. The bridegroom smiled and glanced around as if to say : "Fire away, folks. Here we are ! "

It was some little time before anyone made a sound. At last, out stepped seventy-year-old Siri Tröan. She was small and dried up, with a sunken mouth : she wore a black silk kerchief, gathered in a knot at the back of her neck. When she opened her mouth, everybody could see that she had only one or two teeth left ; she began in a trembling voice, and with the most innocent face :

"A wicked bear lumbers o'er wood and through fen ;
Look out for your sheep there, O Farmer !
He hits with his paw again and again,
And drags a poor beast away to his den ;
With flesh and with blood is his hunger stilled then ;
Look out for your sheep now, O Farmer ! "

Then she drew back among the crowd, as a great shout of laughter went up. The bridegroom laughed scornfully, and the bride would fain have run away ; but he held her fast. They were not through with it yet.

A red-bearded man came forward : it was Nils

Braset ; brother of the man who was to have Jonetta (but here she was, running about with that town fellow). Anyway, he sang :

"My name is Mr. Lazybones, a black-bearded man,
Who lives from the sea about a thirty-mile span ;
My father Sjur and I work at just the same craft—
And for women I am daft."

That was a dram to tickle up their throats ! And the people slapped their thighs and roared.

But when another crone had come forward and sung about a peacock that nested with a crow, Lisbet Flata thought it was high time to put up a fight. Here were these dalesfolk thinking they could hit at these two just as they pleased, and the bridegroom's own mother and brothers and sisters circling round them like vicious cattle about to charge.

And now she stepped forward into the ring, tall and bony : cleared her throat and looked about her. Aye, aye : she was only a cotter's wife, and maybe Anna had cast a slur on both farm and dale ; but all the same she must defend her own child. Little she knew about rhyming, but hymns she did know something about, and now she faced the whole world and sang :

"So many a sinner lost his way,
In days of woe and doubt ;
But over all the Lord's hand lay,
In mercy stretching out.
And he who has a lowly part
Will come into his own ;
For only gold within the heart
Finds grace at heaven's throne."

IV

So quiet came back to the farm, and the younger brothers set to, working double tides, to make good the time that had been wasted on the wedding festivities. Two of them, Ola and Hans, were hard at it in the joinery, sawing, hammering, and planing. They made beds and cupboards and chests of drawers ; and these they sold, and put the money in the bank. The tall, fair-haired youngest son, Nils, hammered away in the smithy—not a few of the gigs and carts in the country round had been made by him, though he was only just turned twenty. Ola had red hair and a light complexion ; he wore gold rings in his ears, not for ornament, but because he had heard that they were good for weak eyes. He had a way of pursing up his mouth and whistling when he was thinking out how to go about a job, and he had only three fingers on his right hand to hold the plane with—the other two had been cut off at the sawmill. Hans was dark of hair and beard, round-shouldered and asthmatic, and people said that his brown eyes were always spying about for something that could be turned into money. But Nils, at the smithy, was the young wag of the place ; he sang when he worked hardest. He had not found it easy to pass the priest for confirmation ; but he knew all about how to make money and how to save it. All three were agreed that they would not stay on the farm a day after Peter had taken over the

management, so it was best to grab what they could for themselves while their mother still owned the timber and the tools. If there was no market at the moment for the furniture and carts, they would go into the barn and make barrels. This was a home industry all through the dale, and for the three of them to get a wagon-load ready was no long job. Then they would put in a horse and drive off with their cargo—bigger even than a load of hay and shining white from a long way off—covering the twenty miles down to the district store, where they got paid for their goods in cash.

Early in the morning the old dame would go round with her staff, and knock on the wall of the room where the young couple slept. But Peter, newly married and uxorious, had no mind for early rising.

"You are best off where you are," he said to Anna, when she tried to get up. They still slept in the store-house loft, for Peter was not inclined to move until he could have the master's bed in the dwelling-house. It was true enough that Anna was happiest with him; but she had always the hope that she would win over the others too one day. She had had to put up with a good many things from them that hurt; but she was sure all this would lessen in time, and she always showed the others her sunniest face. But why should all their eyes be so icy cold? It made her feel defenceless—at a loss which way to turn. If she came into the kitchen, there were the daughters busy with the work that fell to them in the usual routine of the farm, and when she asked if she couldn't help them, they would scarcely even answer. If she went to the old lady to ask if she might sew for her, she was always

told that perhaps she had better do some sewing for herself. One day when the other womenfolk were away at a prayer-meeting she got ready some coffee and cakes and took them on a tray to the men in the joinery and the smithy. Of course, they didn't actually bite her ; but they were not so pleased with her as she had expected, and when the old lady came home and nosed out this piece of news, Anna received a few small gibes for her pains. It was well for her that she had Peter.

He was still very much the bridegroom, and the two of them often took little strolls over the farm, dressed in their Sunday best, like the newly married folk they were ; he in shirt-sleeves with open waist-coat showing his blue home-woven shirt ; she in red skirt and light blouse, and bareheaded in the good summer weather. They looked in one another's eyes as in a mirror, and talked of all that they would do when the farm should be their own. Anna would often go down to the horses, and stand and talk to them ; thinking the while about a little croft down by the sea where the folks themselves had to do the carrying and pulling. If she passed by a calf she would sit down and take it in her lap, and christen it there and then. But, with Peter standing there and looking jealous, she would soon have to turn her attention to him again, and then the two of them would fall to tumbling and rolling each other over on the ground. From time to time she would stop, and turn her corn-coloured head from side to side. It was as if she were expecting that the narrow belt of sky between the mountains would one day broaden out. And she thought how wide and open the day seemed down at

the fishing-village, between the broad, shining fjord, and the long, gentle pine-ridges.

"Now you must come along with me to the sæter," said Peter one day.

It was a two hours' climb up the mountain, to where the small sæter huts stood by a little tarn ; a dairy-maid sat indoors churning, while, outside, a goatherd chopped sticks taken from a great heap of brushwood. It was the first time Anna had been at a sæter, and she was keen on exploring the whole place. And next year, perhaps, it would be hers ; then she'd be a dairy-maid herself, and Peter would be her Saturday night visitor and do his wooing all over again. "What is this thing ?" she asked the goatherd.

"That's an alp-horn," said the boy, and he put the long tube to his mouth and blew a blast that echoed about and about in the hills. The horn looked to Anna like a wooden clarinet, and it was as long as she was. She must try her hand at it now ; but this was an art not to be learnt in a day, and she could only get out a croak or two.

"Look here, I'll show you how !" said Peter, proud of his skill. "No ! You mustn't try again ; you'll spoil your mouth, and that belongs to me, you know ! "

But, of course, all this was just holiday and play ; and they would have to be serious sooner or later. When they were back from the sæter, Anna persuaded Peter to have a talk with his mother.

"Anna is first-rate at spinning," he began.

"I do that myself," said the old woman.

"Can't you let her cook the dinner, either ? "

"Jonetta does that."

"Then why can't you let her go to the cow-shed and milk the home-cows?"

"Lina does that."

At this Peter rose: "Well then, Mother, I believe the best thing'll be for me to take over the farm at once."

The mother looked at him a while and heaved a long, heavy sigh. "I think you'll get the farm into your hands quite soon enough, Peter. There's no hurry."

They're a queer lot of people, he thought; but he was not ready yet to take everything on his shoulders. He looked on at those brothers of his, sweating so hard to grab what they could while there was yet time, and he could not help smiling. They would never dream of looking at a newspaper or a book, and, when he wanted to make them really angry, he had only to tell them that he earned more over a single cattle-deal than they could scrape together in a whole month at their hammering and planing. "But what about when you lose?" they would say. But that was a question he didn't choose to answer.

They were sitting at dinner one day—the old woman in the high seat, the men against the wall, the daughters on the long bench in front of the table, with Anna at the lower end. The eldest daughter, Lina, was pale and dark-haired, with a look of sadness in her eyes—only last spring she had lost her sweetheart, a fine young fellow from one of the rich farms. Presently Peter said aloud, "What are you sitting so far down for, Anna? You're not a servant-girl in this house, that I know of." They all stared at him, and then at Anna; the girls bent their heads and flushed red.

"Anna sits there because she's a newcomer," answered the mother; and Anna hastened to assure them that she was all right where she was.

"No!" said Peter. "You will soon be mistress here, and if you're not allowed to sit next to Mother you can move over to me."

The old lady pressed her lips together. "I don't suppose Anna wants to drive away the daughters of the house," she said; "and I'm still mistress here, I believe."

The brothers tittered, and their eyes said that this was how they liked things to go. But the two sisters started up, and Jonetta blurted out, "We can go our ways if you want us to."

Peter laughed a little. "I never meant *that*. But the sooner you get used to the fact that Anna's my wife, the better."

Then the haymaking began; everybody had to take a hand at it, and the three younger brothers were the keenest of all. Not that they cared any longer about the farm; but haymaking is haymaking, a sort of ecstasy that gets into your blood. They were working in the baking sun on the northern slopes one day, making hay for dear life, when Ola, raking all the time, winked at Hans with his weak eyes and said, "Did you hear how Jonetta was singing to-day?"

Hans helped his rake along with a kick, so that the hay flew in all directions. "Aye," he chuckled; "don't you know she got a letter?"

The other pursed his lips and whistled. "A letter?"

"Aye—from that town fellow—he-he!" Hans bent his head forward, full of importance, but he kept steadily on with his haymaking.

Just then Nils joined them ; he was driving the hay-hurdle, and had come for a load. He had heard everything ; as he stopped his horse he crowed out, " Oh, aye, it seems we haven't kin enough yet in the beggar hamlet."

Anna and Peter were hard at work raking just below ; both heard what Nils said, and Anna bit her lip. Peter took a few steps forward, with the rake in his hand.

" You'd best watch your mouth, Nils," he said.

The young fellow with the round, beardless face only grinned at him. " Aye, I'll watch myself at least as well as you've done."

Peter was not quick-tempered, but now his voice shook. " If you don't behave yourself decently, by God, I'll take and bundle you off the farm ! "

At that the other two brothers came nearer, as if they would take the boy's part. Nils laughed jeeringly, all the time tramping down the hay in the hurdle-cart. " Oh, don't you ruffle up your feathers till you're out of the egg," he said. " You are not quite master here just yet."

It came on to rain one day, and Peter slung his knapsack on his back and started away up the dale. He had heard of two cows near calving that were for sale. It was a pity to have to leave Anna ; but, of course, it wasn't as if he was starting off for America. So he struck out up the road, and was soon thoroughly enjoying himself. A good long tramp seems to ease things so much. At home he liked best to go round and plan out how things are to be set going—the day he gets the reins into his hands people will see a thing or two they haven't seen before. And when the newspaper

came there was much in it that he'd like to discuss with others—but the people at home, young and old, might almost as well be ignorant heathen. And certainly it was good fun to pass farm after farm, taking notice of all the things he would put right if he were the owner. Houses on big estates were left to rot, although the forest was close by—fine fields on sunny slopes choked up with birch scrub. In winter, half-starved beasts ; in summer farming that might have come down from Adam's time. He was vexed at all this, but it was the sort of vexation that really did him good ; it waked him up, made him thoroughly alive ; he was no longer tramping round in the same old stall, gaping at the same old things. When he had the farm he would get on to the District Council ; and it would be a mighty strange thing if he wasn't man enough to bring a bit of a railway winding its way up the dale one day. And he walked on, reckoning out what the rise in value of the farms would be when this came about.

At last he sat down by a mile-post, lighted his pipe, and went on thinking. To tell the truth, he felt he was too good to go slouching around up here in this God-forsaken place. The twenty miles down to the sea and civilisation seemed longer and longer every year that passed. Yet here the farmers stuck, up and down the dale, believing in nothing but the Bible and their savings-bank books. Johan Sverdrup and the Liberals might carry on their struggle away there in the south, but never in the world would it spread so far as to reach here.

Peter Norset sniffed and sniffed and lost himself in his reverie. The sky was grey, and the rain-clouds

came low on the mountains ; fields and haycocks lay moping in the wet ; all the farms looked as if they housed only troll-imps. He recalled a thing that happened to him one winter, when he was out shooting far in the mountains. He had got caught in a snow-storm as thick and dark as the Judgment Day, so thick he couldn't see his hand in front of him. At last he had managed to grope his way on ski to a saeter hut —it was locked, but he broke open the window and climbed in. Once he had a fire going on the hearth, and snow melting in the kettle, he felt he was saved. But later in the night, as he lay on the plank bed shivering with cold, a curious visitor had come to him. It might or might not have been a dream—anyhow, in limped a little old woman, looking like his mother, and started pottering about the fire, and lit a clay pipe, just like the one his mother was always sucking at. There he lay looking on at her. And all at once she turned to him and said : “ You look out for that reading, you Peter. It has made beggars of more than you ! ” When he sat up in bed the crone had vanished. Of course, it was nothing but a dream. But since that time he had never cared to go too near his mother ; it might be all superstitious nonsense ; but there it was, he couldn't help it. And he often wondered if this same mother really wished him well.

And just at this time, while he sat there smoking and pondering, things were happening at Norset that concerned him.

That day the men were busy mowing the grass stubble, for the scythe cuts better in the rain. Their sisters were with them, raking, and when they came back to the house all five of them were dripping wet.

"That farmer of ours is a knowing one, he is," said Nils. "A stroll along the highroad, with waterproof and umbrella, is the work he likes. But where's his wife—the mistress of the house!"

Anna was feeling poorly to-day, said the mother—she was sitting in the storehouse loft, or she might have gone to bed. So they had the table to themselves at the midday dinner.

"Well, it's no great matter when you can make money as easily as Peter does," said Ola, his eyes half shut.

"He loses it quicker still," put in Hans.

"What? Does he lose?"

"Aye, I know he owes money farther up the dale."

"He told me to clear out yesterday, Mother," Nils went on.

The old lady gazed at him. Nils was the apple of her eye. "What's that you're telling me? Peter told you to clear out?"

"Aye, and I've witnesses to it," said Nils, stretching out his long legs beneath the table. And the two brothers bore him out—they overheard it all, they said. The mother's face grew dark, but she said nothing—only ate a little faster.

"I suppose the whole lot of us will soon be kicked out," came in Jonetta.

"If only they let Mother stay on," Hans said softly.

For a moment or two the old lady stared hard at the spoon she was eating with. Then Ola joined in again :

"What d'you think'll happen to the farm when that huckster gets everything into his hands?"

The mother raised her head and looked from one

to the other. Then she sighed : "But is there anything else for it? What would you have me do?" She began to draw her forefinger along the edge of the table.

The brothers exchanged glances, and, after a while, Ola said, "We have talked this over a bit, but, of course, Mother, you may not agree."

She looked again at her three sons : what was this they had talked of?

When they had finished dinner Hans said, "We'd best go into the little room, perhaps, if we're to discuss this thing." There they were sitting and talking all alone ; yet he proposed this !

"Is it Jonetta and me you're afraid of?" asked Lina.

"No, not if you can keep your mouths shut!"

Ola got up and walked to the door of the inner room, and one by one the others went slowly after him. What was it they were to discuss ? The mother stood a moment, hesitating ; and when at last she followed after them, she sighed again, and seemed to lean more heavily on her stick.

Late in the evening Peter came back with the two cows. He was half tipsy, for, of course, a bargain must always be clinched with a drink. He said he must lose no time in being off to town, for he ran the risk of the cows calving before he had them off his hands.

"Now, in the middle of the haymaking?" asked Anna, who had come down and joined the others.

"Oh ! There are plenty of folks on the farm," said

Peter, " and the worst of the haymaking's over. Besides, it isn't as if I'd be away till Christmas."

When he came down from the storhouse loft the next morning, Ola and Hans met him with unwonted politeness. He had scarcely swallowed his early breakfast when they asked him into the best room, and offered him a drink. He looked at them a little suspiciously, trying to make out what they were after, but he sat down between them, and took the dram they offered.

It was Ola who came out with their business. He wanted to ask his brother a favour, he said. It was perhaps too much to ask, but in any case Peter must not take it ill of him. The thing was, people said there were a lot of splendid farms for sale down south, only half a dozen miles from the city. They said that on the farms down there it was so easy to turn your money over; and you could get into town so quickly from there. You had only to get into a cart and give the horse a smack, and there you'd be before you could count three. If you took milk-cans down, you could bring up a load of brewers' grains on the return trip, and grains could be had from the brewers for next to nothing, and they were first-rate feed for fattening either cattle or pigs.

Peter stared at Ola, not understanding what all this was leading up to ; but he wasn't long in the dark. Ola came out with it, his eyes half shut : he didn't see his way clear to run a farm in the dale here, even if he could get hold of one—so out of the way as it was and everything so hard to handle. The question was : would Peter help him and go security for him if he went south and bought ?

Peter sniffed and sniffed and fingered his beard. Hans looked at him with innocent eyes. Ola seemed a little ashamed at having asked such a favour. But how the devil had they come to nose out this idea? Peter saw, in his mind's eye, first the elder brother, and then the two others, settled each on his own easily worked farm, so close to the city that they could turn every straw into money—within an hour's drive of the city market. In town there were lectures and political meetings. And he was to stay on here, in this God-forsaken hole clean away from civilisation, making a shilling now and then on a calf's carcass when he was specially lucky.

"Well, what do you say to all this?" asked Ola.

Peter sniffed. "I must take a trip first and look at these farms," he said; "then we can talk it over—when I come back."

At this point Hans picked up his cue. "D'you know what I've said to Ola?" he began. "I've told him that they're a tricky lot of folks down there in the south. Between ourselves, I don't believe he'll be able to stand up to them. They'll make hay of him before he has time to turn round. The fellow who's to make good there must be a man that's up to their ways and knows how to deal with them."

"You mean it would be the sort of thing for me, rather?" grinned Peter.

"For you? Oh, no! The farm you'll get here should surely do you. To be sure, it isn't exactly next door to town, but still——"

"Maybe you'll buy me out?" Peter flung out carelessly, as if in joke, as he got ready to start.

At this there came a silence; the other two looked

at one another for a moment. "Oh, no!" they both said; "surely it would mean a terrible lot of money?"

"Well, you can make me an offer when I get back," said Peter, as he hurried off.

The two brothers looked thoughtfully at each other. Ola put the cork back into the bottle, and took it over to the cupboard. He took his time over locking it up, before turning to face Hans again.

Peter's trip turned out not to be such a short one after all; when at last he came back he had been all round the southern parishes and had gone over a lot of farms. There was not much to be got out of him; but he opened out when he and Anna were alone in the storehouse loft.

"Aye—now you shan't be tormented any more on this farm," he said, putting his arm around her shoulders.

She stared at him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

And he told how he had found a splendid farm, just up from the city at a place they called Lindstrand: with excellent land, and houses as good as new, and the railway passing the door. "That will be quite another story, won't it, old lady?"

"But you didn't say a word about all this when the others asked you," she objected; but at that he couldn't help laughing.

"I see you've no head for business," he told her. If the others in the house got an inkling that he was keen to be bought out they would make him a ridiculous bid. Nothing of that sort—oh, no!

For a couple of days he kept his brothers in suspense. When they brought up the subject, he would hum and haw and shake his head, and say it would be a hard wrench to give up a farm like this that had been his father's before him. No doubt, he said to himself, they fancied he didn't see through them ; but if they were so set on getting rid of him, he'd take good care that their being his brothers made the deal no cheaper for them.

And then one day he let them come to the point. They offered a sum and he scoffed at it—the next day they raised their offer, but it was still too little. He felt a little sorry for his mother ; perhaps she was remembering now that he, too, was her son—but she should have thought of that before. At last, late one evening, sitting in the best parlour, they came to terms.

It was all over. Now the family would be rid both of him and of the cotter's daughter. But they would have to pay for it.

Anna sighed : she was glad not to stay on here and be a thorn in the flesh to them all, yet she felt heavy-hearted at leaving all this to go out into the unknown.

One day in late autumn they drove down the dale in a gig, a cart-load of furniture following them. On their way they looked in on the Flata folks. Paal looked at his son-in-law, went on chewing, and said not a word ; but Lisbet was gloomy. "If you'd asked me, I'd never have agreed," she said.

As if Peter Norset needed to ask advice of this old cotter woman about buying a farm !

As for Per, when they went aboard the steamer he stood gazing after them with a heavy heart. Here were these two now going out into the world to better

FOLK BY THE SEA

themselves, while he must stay on here, fighting with poverty.

And so they set out. Anna stood on deck, looking back at the little grey hut by the headland—the little hut that closed one eye as it gazed out at the western heavens.

V

WHEN Lisbet Flata was in need of a shilling or two, it was no use asking her old man for it. But she had six or seven hens. And the reason there was never any butter on the table was that the little she got from the two cows had to be saved up to send to the city when someone was going there.

She would go on for weeks storing up the eggs till she had a few dozen, and when, at last, the butter pats had mounted up till they weighed a couple of pounds, she could usually find someone going to town to take them. But, once or twice a year, she would put on her black Sunday clothes, wrap herself well up in her shawls, and set out herself, with the basket of eggs in one hand and the butter keg in the other. It cost eightpence to go by steamer, and that was too much to lay out; but, in the spring and autumn, there was often a chance to go by a fishing-boat. It was cold on the fjord, and she and the other women sat around the mast, holding on like grim death with their numb hands to the things they had brought with them. If the squalls were heavy and the boat lay over and shipped a sea or two, many of the women would shriek aloud; but Lisbet kept her heart up by holding the tighter to her goods, and all the time saying over verses from a psalm.

It was a wonderful thing, of an autumn evening, when the waters lay black, and the mountains on either hand were dark shadows, to come up the fjord

against the wall across the street, and stay there for a while, gazing at the hotel. Next to the cathedral, it was the biggest house in the town ; it had three long rows of windows, one above the other, and a flag flying at the top. Up from the street ran a wide flight of steps with an iron balustrade at each side, and up to these steps drove glass coaches, with fine ladies and gentlemen sitting inside, as if they were in a little room: When they stepped out, a man with gold on his cap and gold buttons on his coat stood ready to receive them. They might well be both princes and counts ; but Lisbet wasn't the one to envy them. Riches have wings ; and besides, she had a suspicion that they all of them lived dissolute lives.

Once, out of pure curiosity, she had tried to walk up those same steps, but the man with the gold on his cap placed himself in front of her, and said she must go round to the kitchen.

"Aye, but, you see, I'm Knutsen's mother," said she.

The man smiled, and shook his head, and told her he couldn't help that ; she must go round the other way all the same, as she had come to sell eggs and butter. And of course she quite understood afterwards that that great big entrance wasn't meant for the likes of her.

But even to come into the big kitchen after crossing the yard was a great event. Directly she opened the door she was met by the smell of such a mass of good things that it was a real treat just to be there. Beside the big oven stood the fat cook in her white overall, amid steaming casseroles and frying-pans that sizzled and crackled. She had only to lift her finger, and there

were girls all ready to run errands for her. And if all the things they cooked tasted as good as they smelt—and no doubt they did . . . ! But she could never be quite sure of this. At any rate, nobody could say these people here were stuck up. "Well, if I don't believe it's Mother Lisbet!" said the cook. "Good day, good day! You've brought us eggs and butter again, I hope. Find her a chair, Nicoline. Do sit down for a bit."

So there she sat, holding tight to her butter keg and egg basket. All about her there was a hustle and bustle of girls; here they were washing up; there plucking fowls and peeling potatoes, or cutting up fish; and over them all was the cook, who spoke to them with the voice of authority. Of course, Lisbet asked at once after Knutsen, and the cook smiled a little, and said that he was very well. But he had a great deal of important work to attend to nowadays; he didn't run in and out with plates and dishes any more, like the other waiters; oh, no, he had to stay in the dining-hall in charge of the whole thing. Yet in spite of this no one could say that he was ashamed of his mother. No sooner had he been told that she was there than he nipped out to see her. "Why, good Lord! Is it really you, Mother?" Then he took both her hands and pressed them, and asked how she was, and how Father was, and all the folks at home and round about. The people that stood round and heard all this must have thought it strange. Well, pardon, but he had such a lot to attend to; he would soon come back again—and he whipped off so that his coat-tails flew out behind him. It was the golden hair, brushed back from his forehead so that it looked

like a halo about his head, that reminded her most of his father—the good-looking farmer's son, that married another woman. But that was something apart; a thing to think of in her heart, and never speak of to a living soul.

Then the cook said she must come into the little side-room and have some coffee. That was all very nice, for the coffee was strong, and the rolls so white and fresh. But, if they had only known how she longed to have a taste—if it were only a spoonful—of all the things they were boiling and frying and that smelt so good they almost lifted the hair on your head; if they had known all this, surely they would have had pity upon her, and put a bit of something on a plate for her. But so much thoughtfulness they never had, and, of course, it would never have done to say anything about it.

Once and again a young and beautiful lady, with hair piled high on her head, came out and spoke to her. It was the mistress herself—she was a widow now, and owned the whole hotel. She would sometimes even pat Mother Lisbet's cheek and say, " You must be proud of having such a son, aren't you? " And Lisbet could only say, " Aye ; thank God, he's a great comfort to his mother, he is."

" Yes, indeed, he's a comfort to all of us," said the lady ; " there is nobody I can rely on as I do on him."

And before Mother Lisbet left, Gjert would come into the kitchen again, and settle with her for the things she had to sell. Then he would walk with her to the gate, and press a note into her hand at parting. And she would take her way to the stores, rich and with a full heart, and buy a few things to take home with her.

But on a day of late spring there came a letter from the mistress herself, asking Mother Lisbet to come to town at once, for her son was in bed, very ill.

This time she stood the cost of going by steamer, although she had little with her to sell ; and in a driving wind-storm she sat on the fore-deck among cattle and sheep-carcasses, while the boat pitched and rolled every way at once, and the wind whistled and moaned in the rigging. Hungry and half frozen she crept ashore, and followed the road between all the lights, away up to the hotel. There she found all the windows lighted up, and the sound of dance-music floated out into the street. That was curious, she thought, with a man lying sick in the house. In the kitchen there was a great rush ; the cook said that a big wedding was being held at the hotel. But she found a girl to show Mother Lisbet the way through the passages, and up the stairs to the top of the house, right under the roof : and here the girl opened a door for her. Within the room the light was dim ; a white-clad Sister rose, and came toward the visitor. “Is it his mother ?” she whispered.

“Aye ; that it is.”

“It’s a good thing you’ve come ; he’s been asking for you a great deal.” Over in the bed lay Gjert, breathing heavily, his face red and swollen, his eyes fast shut.

“It’s inflammation of the lungs,” whispered the nurse.

So Mother Lisbet sat there till her head swam with the heat, looking at the sick man helplessly—for what could she do for him ? He was very restless, throwing himself about in the bed ; and at least she could spread

the blankets over him again; but the nurse, too, was always about him. All of a sudden he opened his eyes and called out loudly, "Mother!"

She answered, "Yes, my child, here I am." But Gjert sank down on the pillows again. No doubt he was quite unconscious that she was there.

So there was nothing for her to do but to sit and look at him. From below, the dance-music streamed up to them continually, and now and again came the sound of cheers and laughter. "I dare say you're tired?" the nurse whispered. "There's a bed ready for you in the next room."

Oh, far from it, Mother Lisbet was not tired. She hadn't come there to sleep.

"Have you had anything to eat?" asked the nurse again. "I can ring and get some dinner sent up for you."

Mother Lisbet had not tasted food since she left Flata, but she shook her head, and said that she didn't care to eat anything.

Suddenly the door opened, and in came the mistress herself, in such grandeur as Mother Lisbet had never seen the like of; white silk gown, bare arms, a string of pearls around her neck, and flowers in her hair. "God bless you for coming," she said, in a tearful voice. Then she kissed Mother Lisbet on both cheeks, and sniffed a little, as if she were going to burst out crying. "Oh, believe me, it's dreadful for me that this wedding should come on just now—but it's a relative of mine—I have to be there myself." Then she went to the bed, bending low over the patient, and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"You must take good care of Mother Lisbet," she

but this was Gjert, and the priest ought surely to understand that this made some difference. Of course, the things that she herself had done during her long life were a very different matter. When the priest had gone and all was quiet again, she sat making up the mournful account—now that Death and the Lord seemed so close at hand. Like enough she, as well as the folk round about her, had told lies and borne false witness against her neighbour; perhaps she might even have grabbed a few herrings from a boat on the shingle when the chance was too tempting. Once she had brought back with her a big bundle of cinnamon that a townsman had sent to his mother who lived close by her, and, God forgive her, she had kept half of it and handed over the other half. She remembered other things of the sort, and they piled themselves up into a mountain of sin. Perhaps if she could get forgiveness for it all now, at once, Gjert would get well again. The Lord must surely be reasonable in all His doings.

After watching by the bed for three nights, Mother Lisbet did in the end fall asleep in her chair, and when she awoke, a man with glasses on was just going out of the room. "That was the doctor," said the nurse: "he thinks the crisis is over now, and that things look hopeful."

"Mother!" came a voice from the bed at last. "Mother, come here!" Gjert stretched out a long, damp hand, and she took it in hers. He tried to smile: "I have known that you were here," he said, and shut his eyes again.

Mother Lisbet stayed on for weeks, and never had she slept in such a bed; never had such food to eat—

plates full and bowls full of all the things that, up to now, she had only known the smell of—in the kitchen.

Then came a time when she could sit with her knitting in her hands, and be a providence to Gjert again, as he slowly grew better. And, well trained as the nurse might be, it was always Mother he called for when a pillow was to be put right, or the bed-clothes did not lie as they should.

At last one day when spring was at full, she stood out in the street again. The lady of the hotel had given her money for a trip out of town to see Anna and Peter. But before setting out she turned and looked back at the big stone building where Gjert and his mistress would be together now without her. Wonderful are the ways of the Lord. When her boy came here as a stable-lad, who would have thought that he would some day be lord and master in such a royal palace?

She made her way to the railway station, asking as she went. In those days it stood on the island; and she had to pass by the cathedral and over a long bridge that spanned the river. And then they showed her into one of the tiny houses that stood in rows on rails; and all at once, as she sat there, the strange little house began to move. Mother Lisbet had often been out in a heavy sea, but this was worse, it made her head swim. A man in uniform came and asked to see the tickets, and, all of a sudden, he opened the door, and swung himself out into the empty air. Then he clambered along a board that ran alongside the carriages, and he held on fast and wasn't thrown off although the train was going at full speed. From people in the carriage with her she learned that it

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would be worst of all when they came to Sluppenbrua, for there a bridge went high in the air, over a deep ravine, and everyone said that it would go smash one day, just as the train got out into the middle. Mother Lisebæt sat holding fast on to the bench, and closed her eyes when they told her, "Now we're there!"—And now there was a rumbling, and a new kind of rattling under the wheels—the Lord have mercy on us, surely the worst is coming now. No, it's done it safely once more. For now they are over, safe on firm ground again.

It was only a little farther to her stopping-place, and there was Peter Norset waiting with his horse.

VI

THE farm that Peter had bought was only six or seven miles from the town, and lately a lot of strangers had come and settled in this part. When the railroad came, many other things had followed in its wake ; new customs came in ; people had money in their pockets, and the farmer became half a townsman and speculator. One would grow rich, sell his farm, and move into town ; another would get into debt, be sold up, and go off to America. From the parishes out by the fjord, and up from the dales, came enterprising men, who found things too cramping and narrow where they were ; so they settled down on these farms, where it was so easy to rake in money if one only used one's brains.

Peter Norset had never before understood so thoroughly how backward things were where he came from. You would find no long tables and benches in the living-rooms here ; but a fine round varnished table with a plush table-cover in the middle of the room ; plush-covered arm-chairs about it ; painted wooden floor ; pictures on the walls ; curtains at the windows, and a great porcelain hanging-lamp. And when the big farmers went to town they turned out, not in homespun and fur cape, but in broadcloth and polished boots and high stiff hats.

On festivals and high holidays, there was no dishing up of broth and cream porridge ; no, there must be steak and rissoles, and the beer was from the brewery

in the town. After a business deal it wasn't a case of just a dram or two—they celebrated with coffee and liqueurs and Swedish punch. Here Peter had a chance to meet fellows who could talk about something else than scrimping and saving and the Gospel ; here the talk ran, all night long, on politics and elections, and the ups and downs of the market. The farm was called Leira ; it stood so high that there was a wide view, taking in two or three parishes. A restless country, like a land once furrowed and buckled by great landslides, where the mounds and little valleys had grown green again—now farms lay all around, high under the ridges, out on the green hillsides, and on the levels ; white and yellow dwelling-houses and red barns, flagstaffs and gardens everywhere, and the clay-grey river winding its way downward amid trees and green banks. Far to the east the country rose like the vault of a capsized boat, and here lay rows of farms with windows that flamed in the sunset. And in clear weather you could see two or three of the town spires low down under the sky.

Twice or thrice a day the railway train roared past, and it was still such a novelty that every time people would stop and stare. "There's the train," they said. It was always a fresh marvel to them, especially in the darkness, when the line of little houses with lighted windows ran along the ground, spouting smoke and sparks into the air. Tethered horses ran round with heads thrown up, snorting in terror : often they would break loose, and gallop off over ditches and fences with an end of the tether whipping round their legs ; and out from the farms rushed bareheaded men, flying to catch them.

The first year, Peter Norset was cautious in his purchases of cattle. It was better to sell hay and straw and get ready money in hand. But just as it was getting near hay harvest a great man came driving up to the farm in a cariole. It was no less a person than Mr. Wölner, of Havsteina manor, the largest property in the countryside. He called himself a gentleman farmer, and he looked it—a stout, clean-shaven man in a grey suit and grey hat, with shining riding-boots and brown gloves. “Good day, good day, Mr. Norset—I thought I’d like to call and see you.” No, he wouldn’t come in, thanks ; he only wanted to buy the whole hay-crop in order to bale it and send it off to England. There stood Peter, bareheaded and in his shirt-sleeves, listening to an offer that nearly took his breath away. Price to be fixed according to weight and paid on the spot. Peter accepted. Haymaking time came, and it was a good year. Mr. Wölner sent people with presses to bale the hay, and away they drove with it in the twinkling of an eye. Payment was made by a bill payable in three months, and Peter got the money at once from the bank ; hundreds of pounds, with only a small deduction—discount, they called it. But Mr. Wölner evidently had big business on hand, for when the three months were up he came and wanted to renew the acceptance, and, of course, Peter could not refuse. The neighbours told him that Mr. Wölner was good for any amount ; he’d only to go and have a look at Havsteina and he’d see that the King himself couldn’t live in grander style.

What Peter liked best of all here was the life and bustle going on all about him. Buy six oxen to-day,

these fellows who only wanted to drink and trade with him.

It wasn't like this in the dale he came from. Those trips over the hills on ski—do you remember them? You could take your time then; there was nothing in the wide world to hurry about. You could sit and dream then, and feel rich with the riches of the hills and skies. Well, well! could it be that he was longing to get home again? Stuff and nonsense! But do you remember that winter day when the snow-storm came on and you had to grope your way through it to the sæter hut? When you lay shivering in the bunk, and all at once in came the little lame old woman, and began to fiddle with the fire. When she turned her face, the little dried-up face, toward you with: "Beware of that reading, you Peter. It has made beggars of more than you." He lay there and lived it all over again; stuff and nonsense it might be, but why did it always come back to him? Was his mother still alive, he wondered?

It was warm and sunny that spring day when he drove Mother Lisbet from the station up to Leira farm. Folk were busy out in the fields, and the meadow slopes were yellow with coltsfoot. The old cotter woman sat in the cariole, feeling quite bashful; never had she driven in such style—and she was not even a midwife to be fetched in state! "There's the farm," Peter pointed from his seat behind. A long-stretched yellow-painted house, with garden in front and red farm-buildings behind—and if that wasn't the flag flying! The old lady was almost in tears.

They drove into the great yard just as a man with two plough-horses was setting out for the fields. Out

came Anna, as pale and thin as ever. "Good day, Mother! Welcome to Leira!" They went into a fine parlour where it was almost as grand as at the hotel; and when they went to table she found the food not so much worse either. Aye, aye, this is the way things sometimes go. First it is Gjert who climbs so high in the world, and now it is Anna.

But when the old woman had had time to pull herself together a little, she began to look more closely at her daughter. Her face was not quite the same, after all; it was so drawn now around the mouth, and when she spoke her voice sounded so cold. It wasn't easy, either, to get her to look her mother in the eyes. Peter would come in for a moment and talk and talk, give his usual sniff and light his pipe, and then put it aside again and go out. A little after he would come in once more and sit down, strike a match and light up again; but, before one knew where one was, off he would rush again. "He has a lot on his hands, your man, I suppose?" asked Mother Lisbet.

"Yes," sighed Anna: "it looks like it."

They had barely finished supper the second day when Peter ran upstairs and changed his clothes, and soon after he drove out of the yard in a cariole, as hard as the horse could go. "Where can he be going so late?" asked the mother, and Anna sighed again: "Do you think I know?"

It was a pleasure to Mother Lisbet to be shown about, outside and in, and to find everything so big and grand. And it touched a tender spot when she saw the old chest of drawers that had been repainted for Anna's dowry in the guest-room where she slept. There it stood looking at her, and asking if she

remembered the time when first she got it, as a girl: " You took the only thing you owned and gave it to your daughter, you did—but now I stand here. There wasn't room for me in the parlour, no ! I wasn't so fine as the things they bought at the auction." Ah, well ! But, anyway, there it stood, and made the room homely and cosy for Mother Lisbet when she lay down to sleep. But if only she could get a little nearer to Anna !

It came at last, the evening before she left. After she had gone to bed, Anna came into her room. " So you are going to leave me again, Mother ? " said she, looking out through the window.

" Aye, but it's been a great comfort to see that you're so fortunate, child," said the old lady artfully, looking at nothing.

" Oh, yes, it seems so, doesn't it ? " Anna came over to her and sat on the bed's edge.

" And it isn't often one sees a couple that get along together as well as you and Peter," went on Mother Lisbet in her most innocent tones.

" Aye, maybe we might get on worse—we two," answered the daughter in an ice-cold voice.

" I don't know that I understand you quite," said the mother, fixing her eyes now on Anna's face.

" If I could only understand myself ! But I was only a chit of a girl when I was married—and now I almost think I'm too grown up ! "

There was silence between them for a little while. Then Anna began to tell the story. The reason Peter was never at rest for a moment was that a great mishap had come upon them. The big man at Havsteina had speculated so wildly in sending hay to England

that at last he had come to grief altogether. And the bank had come down on Peter for payment of the bill he had endorsed, and it came to hundreds of pounds. Now he was going about everywhere trying to get people to stand security for him in return for a mortgage on the next crop. But in the autumn there were big sums of interest and instalments to be paid, and there was one creditor who had a first mortgage on the farm and the farm-gear both. So they weren't easy times for Peter just now, that was certain.

Mother Lisbet sat up in bed. "Surely you don't mean that you will have to leave all this?"

"Oh, no! I dare say Peter will find a way out; he is so clever. He has gone in with some other men to buy a lot of horses and send them to Sweden. May-be they'll make a good bit of money out of it. Anyhow, I dare say they'll help us to keep the farm. But how I wish we had never come here!"

Mother Lisbet looked at her daughter. Anna sighed and put her hand to her eyes as if to wipe away tears. But there were no tears there; and that was not so strange either, for how could tears come to that set little face? "But they say it's so easy to make money here," ventured the old woman.

"Aye, that's the worst of it, you see. Easy come, easy go—and all this is just about ruining Peter. There! Now it's out. Good night, Mother."

So next day Mother Lisbet went off, and this time the fine carriage didn't make her feel quite so bashful.

To be sure Peter Norset would keep the farm. But he had had a blow that stung, and he was the man to learn his lesson! After this he would look twice at

his man, even if his rooms were finer than any king's palace. If only the accursed interest and instalments had not pressed so heavily, he would gladly have stopped this running about to buy and sell. Anna suffered for it ; the farm suffered for it. And for himself it was worst of all. He floundered about, finding no solid foothold—he hated to be alone, and the only relief was to sit with a party of his comrades over their steaming drink while the talk ran on about profits and losses and prices. But just wait till he could get together a full stock of cattle : then he could begin to take in money for the milk, and there would be an end to this eternal running hither and thither for a risky chance of gain.

The two men who were his partners in exporting horses to Sweden did help him out of his difficulties with the bank. So it was only reasonable that he, in his turn, should stand surety for them when they had to cast about in a hurry for more capital for their business.

The autumn came, and the big payments for interest and instalments fell due. The last lot of horses sent to Sweden had sold badly—the loss was not heavy, but it was a loss. So the three men sat round the table over their toddy and discussed whether they should drop the business, or recoup themselves by a fresh venture. Far on in the night they all agreed to stick to their guns ; but all three at this moment had interest and instalments on their farms to pay, so they had to stand security for one another for fresh loans from the banks. Peter had a feeling that he was playing with his wife and his farm for stakes, but he saw nothing for it but to go on playing.

VII

THE winter storms raged over the little hamlet ; the men were at the Lofoten fishing, and, as the weeks wore on, there was pinching and paring in many a house. Little Martin at Flata stood by the window and saw the fjord all spume and spray, and heard the rattle of the sand and seaweed flung by the storm against windows and walls like a shower of stones. He slipped out just for a moment to see if it were possible to be blown up to the sky, but, instead, he was flung far in across the field and had to pick himself up out of a snowdrift. In the room, the old man sat with his glasses far down on his nose, cobbling shoes ; and when he was at that it was well not to go too near him. The womenfolk were at their spinning and weaving, and every now and then would lift their heads and sigh : "Hark how it blows ! Suppose it's as bad as this up at Lofoten." This year Per was off to the fishing as a half-share man,¹ and they hadn't heard from him for a good while now.

Then, through the yellow-grey winter light, came a woman, wading through the snow ; she carried a can, and wanted to borrow a little milk ; farther inland another one worked her way through the drifts to fetch a pound of flour. And down from Skaret, the croft high up under the rocks, came Maren, with a sack flapping in the wind. The potatoes in the cellar

¹A man who, owning no part in the boat, and having no gear of his own, receives only a half-share in the profits.

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had gone bad ; but potatoes were cheap, and the children got little else to eat.

Just about now Mother Lisbet hit upon the notion that this would be a good time to have a meeting of the missionary society. It was quite a long while since the women had held their last meeting, and surely this was just the weather to sit and knit and sew for the heathen and sing a psalm or two ; besides, most of the women had menfolk up at Lofoten, and it certainly couldn't do any harm to come together and think on God's Word. It wasn't much that she had to offer them, but she made Martha wrap up well, and sent her off to the general store with a dozen eggs, and back the girl came with coffee and sweet rolls. "Be sure the Lord will make it good," said Mother Lisbet—as she had a way of saying when she scraped together clothes and food to send to someone who had nothing. But how much credit she had laid up with the Lord in this fashion was a thing she could never remember.

A howling storm was raging when the day came : the sort of north-wester that brings the Last Day to mind. The fallen snow was blown up heavenward again, and fell once more like trailing ghosts, drifting across hill and heath. The fjord sent great foaming rollers rushing up over the shores, as if bent on devouring the very huts where they stood. When Martha went to the shed to milk the cows that morning, she had to crawl on her knees with a pail in each hand, and every moment she expected the roof to fly away. "Surely you can't think a soul will come to-day," she said when she came back.

"Oh, you never know," said Lisbet. She knew the

women, and she had the hut swept and garnished as if for a holy day. Paal raged, and dragged his fur cap down over his ears, and took out the sleigh, and set off to fetch peat. It was bad enough outside, but to sit indoors with all those women would be a great deal worse.

Once in a while Mother Lisbet went to the window and looked out. The hut groaned and shook in the storm : out in the kitchen the crockery was like to fall from the shelves, and, dear Lord, how like a rushing troll-ride the heavens seemed ! A day to make you think of shipwreck and men clinging to their upturned boat : a day when all on dry land would do well to put up a psalm.

"Not a soul will come," said Martha—but out on the road, between the fences, they could actually see a figure coming, all wrapped in shawls that tore themselves loose, and whipped about in the air. . . . It must be someone coming here. . . . Again and again she stopped, bearing back against the storm ; waiting till the worst was over. Then she was lost in a flurry of snow, but soon after she appeared again. . . . It must be Lösse Trön—don't you see it is Lösse ? . . . She sunk deeply into the drifts, but levered herself out again with her staff—to be sure it was Lösse. Let the storm rage as it will, she came on, with her knitting and her psalm-book safely tucked under her arm. Who could stay quiet at home and miss a meeting for coffee and God's Word ?

And from the other quarter, that must be Berit Strand ploughing her way through the storm. There the snow is drifted so high that it tops the fences, so that the woman looks like a blackbird flapping through

the air. It was Berit who had started the story that Lisbet and Paal had broken into the storehouse at Skaret—the Lord forgive her, as freely as she is forgiven by Lisbet. Besides, they were acquitted, and Berit herself was branded as a slanderer. She has a mother-in-law that's in her dotage, and once she made a ball of potato skins, and pretended it was a fish-ball, and got the poor old woman to eat it. No wonder she feels she has need of God's Word ! and here she comes with her psalm-book hidden in her breast. No doubt she thinks she mustn't let bad weather matter to her when it's a question of working for the heathen.

And see, even Lame Marja comes, poling herself down over the fields from Oppistua ; she bends lower and lower over the drifts, when the storm seems like to carry her off to Heaven. Everybody knows that *she* doesn't knit mittens for the Cause, but for a married daughter with many children—so, in a way, her work goes to the heathen after all !

And isn't that Peter-Nilla coming, too ? She that has consumption, and is so wasted that her face is like a death's head. Even in good weather this long bag of bones walks so slowly that her feet scarcely seem to move ; so to-day she is bundled up on a sled and has her two daughters to tug and haul her along. Peter-Nilla is a widow, and to this day she tries to be coy and kittenish as a young girl when there is a man anywhere about ; but no doubt there's time yet, even for her, to turn to the Lord.

Mother Lisbet goes over to the end window, and there she sees Maren Skaret fighting with the north-wester. Poor creature, has she clothes enough to keep

out weather like this? Her man is at Lofoten, and her hut is so miserable that she has to hang sheepskins over the doors, and even so the five children have to be packed into the bed even in the day time to keep them from freezing to death. But Maren is one that never complains; she struggles on as best she may, and takes the world as it comes. Right after her comes Netta Strand from Strandplassen; fat and heavy. She isn't exactly religious, for, week-days and holy days, she's hard at work scraping pence together, to hide away in a stocking and bury in the bed-straw. But a mission meeting is a thing not to miss; so to-day she takes a holiday, and pushes out through the gale to gossip with the others.

Out in the porch the women stamp about; one after another they take the broom that stands there and sweep the snow from their skirts and their legs. Then the door opens and in they come, still with the snow thick on their heads, so that it showers down on the floor when they throw off their kerchiefs. "Oh, what a storm!" they pant; and stand upright, almost surprised to find that the storm isn't blowing in here. But Peter-Nilla topples back into a chair, shaken with a bout of coughing; she presses her skinny hands to her chest, and seems on the point of fainting. Best pour a cup of steaming coffee into her at once! But when she has gulped down a little she gasps, "My pipe!" "Yes!" says Mother Lisbet, "but won't you wait till you've had a bite to eat?" "No, now—at once!" She fumbles in her pocket; pulls out a clay pipe, burnt quite black, and puts it into her sunken mouth. "A match!" she says. Martha strikes a match and brings it to her, and the gaunt scarecrow

about the way to dye woollen yarn crimson, and Peter-Nilla's death's head has grown quite lively as she tells about a young girl who she's sure is in trouble, though she swears and vows that it isn't so ! This is something for Lame Marja. "Well, I never !" she cries, quite forgetting her coffee. "Isn't that what I've always said about that peacock !" Berit Strand's face is flabby and wrinkled—she's a guest now in the house of the woman she tried to send to jail, but she sips her coffee contentedly and gloats over this latest bit of news. The talk grows lively, and little by little they begin to giggle, and at last to laugh right out. But just then Lösse produces her hymn-book, and takes out a picture from between the leaves. "Now I'll show you something," she says, and her voice makes a silence about the table. With fervour she goes on. "Now I'll ask you all just this : have you ever seen anything so beautiful ?"

It's a little oleograph of the Saviour, with the crown of thorns about His head, that she bought the other day for threepence from a lay-preacher. Never has she seen Our Lord so young and beautiful : the face is round and rosy ; the large blue eyes are turned heavenward, and down on the cheeks there are glistening tears. His clothes are of scarlet and silver. The picture is passed from one to another around the table, and most of them have to put on their glasses to look at it. Oh, aye ! They must agree with her that He is very beautiful. And no doubt He will look like this when He meets them in Heaven—if they can only fit themselves to come there.

Well, well ! The time comes to finish their coffee and give thanks, and soon after they are sitting

knitting and sewing, while Lösse reads aloud from her accounts of the mission field. During a pause Maren Skaret asks guilelessly : " I expect it's a long way to Mada—— Wasn't it Mada—— ? "

" Madagascar." Lösse sets her right.

" Yes—I expect it is a long way there—farther than to Lofoten."

" Oh—great heavens ! " sighs Lösse ; " there are no heathen at Lofoten, you know. They that walk in darkness live much farther away." The others shake their heads a little, and think how true this is. Lösse goes on reading about the missionary work in Madagascar, and to these women, huddled together from the wintry weather in the little room, come visions of warm countries, far, far away, where brown heathens go about naked, except for a bit of cloth around the middle. Names of fruits and trees they know nothing of come up in these reports ; palms, bananas, grapes—they hear of huts of straw and a sun so fierce that the missionaries have to take medicine to guard against it. It must all be very, very far away, to be sure, but it brings strength and comfort to hear about it. When Lösse is finished they take out their psalm-books and sing, though they barely hear each other's voices through the roar of the north-wester that shakes the hut.

All the while Martin, who sits over by the stove, with the cat in his lap, is looking at Peter-Nilla and wondering if he'll be allowed to go to her funeral now that he has a new pair of trousers.

While this was going on Paal was dragging his heavy sled up the Cleft, and he had had the luck to join company with a trusty friend, his neighbour, Elias

Daber. Elias was a whipper-snapper of a man who lived in a hut on the other side of the road, with his wife, a tall, pale woman, who had a way of cuffing him about the ears. Ever since he had been in service with the District Judge at Lindegaard he swaggered about with a stick when he went for a walk, and turned out his toes and walked along just exactly as the Judge did. People might laugh at him if they liked ; he knew his own worth. Elias didn't earn a penny all winter long ; he chewed stalks instead of tobacco, just as Paal did, and often one of them would go over and borrow from the other. His wife must surely have been in one of her tantrums to-day, since her man was out in weather like this. There was no talking to one another in this storm ; they struggled along, lugging their sleds up the long hills, and every now and then one would stop and shout out "Heigh !" to the other. But, farther in, the sheltering ridges broke the force of the storm, and here the two stood still and looked down on the hamlet, where the houses cowered under the whirling spindrift, while the fjord seemed trying to fling up monstrous waves to the heavens themselves. Ah, well, it's a good time to be on dry land just now.

The reason the two men liked so well to be in one another's company was that they knew they were at one in a matter that was never mentioned between them. At one time Elias had worked as a carpenter, but on one occasion a bed of his making had collapsed on the floor under a bridal couple, and he had had to take it back. After that he refused to touch a plane again. People could make their own beds, he said, and his old woman could carry on about it as much as she

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along the hill-crests, till they groaned and moaned for help ; it was strange to stand down on the path below in quiet. Paal stood and waited for his comrade ; they would neither of them be the worse for a breathing-spell. They sat down together on one sled, chewing and spitting, and saying, "Aye, aye, this is weather and no mistake." They looked all about them, not ill pleased to see the ridges lashed by the storm while they sat below in shelter. Then Elias heaved a long sigh—he had had a beating from his old woman to-day, but he said not a word about that. He cleared his mouth out and turned to Paal. "I expect you haven't got a stalk or two you could give me ? "

The other felt in his waistcoat pockets, and gave him a handful. "Are you cleaned out ? "

"I was cleaned out a week ago."

"Lord ! But what are you chewing, then ? "

"A bit of tarred rope," said the old man, sighing again. "Things aren't so easy nowadays."

Paal sighed, too. "Aye, you're right there and no mistake ; things aren't so easy—that they're not."

There they sat, these two old fellows, enjoying themselves not a little in spite of everything, because they had got to the top of the hill, and were sitting there in shelter. Their faces were weather-worn ; their trousers were a mass of patches ; they drew breath and chewed and spat, and wiped their noses with their mitts, and looked straight ahead of them, and let the world take its way.

Soon they were hauling at their sleds again, in over the bog-land, to where the peat-stacks stood up, grey under their film of snow. They did not help one

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another in the loading, but somehow it came about that they were side by side again on the homeward way ; and now their job was to get the loads safely over the snow-drifts. If a man had a horse he could walk alongside and prop up the load when need was ; but a cotter has to be both horse and man. It is still worse when one gets out on to the hill-slopes and has to coast down them with the heavy load. The man hangs on between the ends of the runners, with his back against the load, and holds fast and steers with his feet—and heigh ! away he goes. In one place there will be ice-crust on the snow, and then you'll come on deep drifts ; you may easily upset, you may easily go headlong into a ditch ; but it's worst of all when your feet stick and you're flung forward on your face, with the load on top of you. . . . Elias Daber stood still for a moment to see how things went with his friend. If Paal should go over it would be a bad business to come full tilt on top of him. But that old man had been out on a winter day before now, and, safe and sound down on the level road, he turned round and shouted a “Heigh !”

“Heigh !” answered Elias, and off he set. His little face, with its red tuft of beard under the chin, was twisted with the fury of his struggles to hold back his load from going its own way. The storm blew up again, whipping showers of snow into his face ; but he only spit back tobacco-juice in return. He knew what he was up to. Besides, it was good fun, after all ; it made you think of the time you were a boy and whizzed down here with a girl in your lap. At last he had made the run once more and landed safe and sound ; and there was Paal standing waiting for him.

And you would think that old fox had seen through Elias and knew he was afraid to go home! For he pulled his fur cap down tighter and called out: "Perhaps you'll be looking in to-night?"

"Now you're saying something!" cried the other through the storm. "But I must get home with my peat first."

The two men struggled on with their loads, guiding them carefully up and down the drifts, while all the time the north-wester tried to whirl them off into space.

In the out-house Paal took his time, and he knew that Elias was doing the same. They were both exact to a hair in building the peat up, course upon course, so that it looked like a smooth-planed wall. This was a thing they *could* do—a thing that nobody could expect them to make money out of.

It was twilight, and the stranger womenfolk had gone their way, when Elias Daber came into the low-ceilinged room. The little man straightened himself and said good evening and "Bless the work," and waited at the door till they bade him come in and sit down. Nobody needed to teach him his manners. There was a rare smell of coffee and pastry cakes, and it wasn't long before he and Paal were set down to them together at the table. They did not like the women's missionary meetings, these two, but they didn't object to their leavings. Elias Daber emptied more cups than one, and he thought in his heart: what if his wife had known!

But when, after the lamp had been lit, he got up to go and was come to the door, he turned about and came back a step. They all looked at him. It was

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clear he wanted to say something that was hard to get out. At last, drawing the back of his hand across his forehead, he said : " U-um ! We haven't had any salt fish in the house for a long time now—do you think I could borrow a few herrings ? " Now it was out.

They gave him a canful, and, with it in his hand, he drew himself up, and there really was a touch of the Judge at Lindegaard about him. But when he was out of the door, the others looked at one another and smiled a little ; they understood very well that now it would be much easier for him to come home to his old woman.

At Flata they could always look forward to the spring, when their young fisherman would come home from Lofoten with his earnings. But Elias Daber was too old to go to sea, and he had neither sons nor daughters.

VIII

So the winter dragged by, with sometimes a spell of darkness and storm, sometimes one of moonlight and calm weather. Mother Lisbet tended the byre, and the two cows, the pig, the hens, and the six sheep were like kinsfolk to her. She knew very well that cattle must have rest and quiet, but she felt it in her bones when they began to want her and wait for her. How many times in a day she took a trip across to them she couldn't tell you exactly. Often, as she sat knitting, it was as though a voice told her that it would do the milch cow good to have a pail of warm water that'd been passed through a sieveful of hay ; and so she got up and got it ready. She went slowly with the pail in her hand, and opened and shut the doors quietly, and her face was full of care and thought for them all. In the cattle-shed they knew her steps, and called out to greet her while she was still far off. The hens hopped from the racks down into the stalls, and looked after themselves, pecking at what they could find ; but all the same they added their cluckings to the chorus, and the cock started off crowing, just as if it were sunrise. When she opened the door, it was as if she herself were a Providence—all the heads turned to her, and asked what good things she had brought them now. And just when the din was at its height all around her, she told them they must have a little patience—and then they stopped and looked at her and waited

and waited. And yet people say that it is no use to talk to animals !

In the evening little Martin was allowed to come with her and carry the milk pail, and he always felt in the byre almost as if it were a holy day. It was not much that he could see in the darkness, for the lantern was set on the floor, and lighted only a little ring about itself. But he stood by the sheep pen, looking at the little long-legged lamb that was born just after Christmas : and while the grown sheep poked their muzzles into the hay, and chewed and chewed, the little creature too tried to eat a few straws, but got a grass seed into its nose, and sneezed and wagged its behind. Of course, the sheep understood very well what the lamb said, but they had no time for him just then. It was different with the pig—he clambered with his forefeet on the pen and looked so inquisitive. “Nuff, nuff ! ” he said, in five different tones—some were questions and some were answers. When Martin told him that the bell-cow was going to calve soon, the pig thought it a great piece of news : “Nuff, nuff ! You don’t mean to say so ? ” And a wave of loving-kindness seemed to flow around the boy from stall and pen, and he stood steeped in it—all things seem so sheltered, so deep-felt, as if God the Father and the Creation had drawn very near. It was a wrench when at last they had to leave ; and the animals must have thought the same, for they lifted up their voices when the two folks from the house opened the door. Outside was winter, and stars, and a little lantern moving over the snow.

But Mother Lisbet was famous, too, for the rugs she wove, and during these winter days she sat

indoors, sending the shuttle back and forth. She was at work on a coverlet with red, black, white, and blue stripes running across it; and when people asked what it was for, she told them she wasn't quite sure. She couldn't very well say right out that the coverlet was to be spread one fine day over a grand bridal bed in the big hotel in the city. She sat there wondering whether she and her old man would be asked to the wedding. Dear Lord, that would be coming among the great ones of the earth with a vengeance.

Martha sat by her mother carding and spinning, and at such times much may be running in a young girl's head that she can't well talk about. The men of the inland parish were not away at Lofoten; and every now and then she heard of dances and merry-making up there. She sighed as she thought about it—but she supposed even that was sinful. The other girls of the hamlet could, at least, look forward to the men coming home in the spring from the fishing; for they didn't have to bolt their doors on Saturday and Sunday nights. Sometimes she would lie awake in the night, and imagine that her mother had forgotten to lock up, and she would listen for footsteps in the stillness—and there he was coming. And he was every bit as grand as the man Anna had got—for surely she was no worse favoured than Anna—perhaps he was a teacher or a sergeant—as handsome as a real prince—and now the outer door was opening, and there were steps on the stairs. And here she lay in her bed trembling.

One day, as they sat in the room, she and her mother, each busy with her own work, Martha said something about the engagements and weddings there

were sure to be in the hamlet when the men came home in the spring. She knew that Marja Bruvolden was sitting at home making herself a yellow petticoat ; and Lina from Strand was in the village store the other day, buying stuff for a new dress. They were making themselves very smart ; and you couldn't blame them, for one is only young once. The mother looked at her, and after a while she said : " What about you ? Is there someone you are waiting for ? " She asked the question as if it was a thing she had long been thinking of.

" Me ! Never in the world ! "

" Why not ? Are the others so much better than you ? "

" Oh, the others—they don't keep the men locked out," and Martha bent forward, flushing red.

Mother Lisbet lifted her head and looked straight in front of her through her glasses. She did not get angry, or preach. She herself had fallen into trouble when she was a girl, and Gjert had come. But that which had begun in sorrow and anguish had turned one fine day into a blessing. So wonderful are the ways of the Lord. Most of the things we do are sinful, but, all the same, youth is youth. She thought about the other girls in the hamlet. Were they to get married and not Martha, all because her mother was so much stricter than the others ? Mother Lisbet started weaving again, but now there was something new in the air, and the daughter felt it, and worked on the faster.

She seldom got out of the house that winter, except when dusk was falling, and she had to go out and fetch water for both the kitchen and the byre. She wrapped

herself up against the wind and the cold ; put the yoke over her shoulders and hung the pails upon it, then set off up the fields through the snow-drifts. The opening in the well-head was frozen again, and she had to break a hole in the ice to get her pail into the water ; the wind tore at her hair, but she turned her round, rosy face against it, and let it batter her—it was what you might call a change at least. Her young shoulders were accustomed to bearing up a heavy load, and when the full buckets hung upon the yoke she sank together a little under the weight of them, but bent forward against the storm, and made her way back through the snow-drifts again. She had to make many trips before she had fetched water enough for both folks and cattle. Her mother would scold her for never putting a warm covering round her head—she couldn't understand, of course, how like a man the north-wester can seem.

Oh, the long, eternal winter, after Christmas was passed, when the hamlet lay there, sullen and forsaken, lamenting night and day in the moaning of the sea. Nothing ever happened to liven things up : it was a great event if a man drove past in a sleigh, up on the road. "It's the doctor," people said, and they stood at their windows staring out. "Wonder who is ill this time ! "

But there came a day when such a sleigh turned off the road and came driving down to Flata. There was great excitement in the house, for it was Peter Norset. He got out of the sleigh, quite the gentleman in his overcoat, and had his horse put into the wood-shed. He was out this way on business, he said, but at the moment he was short of ten pounds, and he

needed them at once : he wanted to buy another horse to take home with him, for he was still trading in horses with Sweden.

He sat at the table and helped himself generously to the eatables and the coffee, giving his little sniff now and then, and telling them what a brisk business was doing in the south just then in the sale and purchase of farms. Well, he was wondering whether Paal would stand surety for a loan of ten pounds from the bank, so that he could get the money at once. He had one guarantor already, but he needed another.

Mother Lisbet turned her head toward the window. Paal tried to catch her eye, but couldn't manage it. After a pause he asked, "But would they accept me?"

Peter Norset couldn't help laughing at this. "No fear of that!" he said. "You're a bigger man than you think, Paal ; you just sign, and I'm all right. And it's only for a month ; as soon as I get my money from Sweden this loan will be paid off. You see ; here it is—only a question of a month."

Then a dried-up ink-pot and a rusty pen were brought out, and with his big, swollen hands Paal just managed to scrawl his name down as surety for this big farmer from the south.

Peter did not linger long in the cotter's hut ; he had a lot of places to visit, and he was off to-morrow by the steamer for the city with the horses. Oh, aye, Anna had sent her greetings by him. And he cracked his whip and drove off.

Left to themselves, the old cotter and his wife looked at one another.

The days dragged on, and they waited and waited

for a letter from Per. Mother Lisbet worried ; Paal said nothing ; when the weather was dirty he was always indoors, cobbling shoes or making brooms. But when a report went round from house to house that a boat from the hamlet had capsized in the Vest Fjord and that two men were lost, he began to wander in and out, chewing all the time. One evening, when the two women came into the room, the old man was sitting over by the table, with his spectacles on, singing aloud from a hymn-book :

“Thine anger turn away
In mercy, righteous Lord . . .”

The voice came from the depths, as if the words were sobbed out, and in the big hand, blackened with pitch, the hymn-book seemed so small and helpless. After he had finished the hymn he folded his hands for a moment, and looked out before him through his glasses. The two women did not dare to move.

But when at last he saw they were there he grew bashful at once. You might almost have thought, as he sat there, that his whole face, with the cleft in the chin, was asking their pardon. He tried to smile, but jumped up then and started for the door. Fortunately, someone else came in just then and met him ; it was Elias Daber.

Later on little Martin had an attack, and had to lie abed all the time coughing. Mother Lisbet put a cloth dipped in turpentine on his chest, and a kerchief wet with vinegar around his head. It was sad that the

boy should be so ill and frail. But there was always this consolation : he might be allowed to pass away while he was still a child. Then she could feel sure that he would go to the right place ; otherwise who could tell what might become of a poor little creature like this, with neither father nor mother ? He wouldn't learn to read ; he had no turn for work, and the neighbours often came and complained that he had thrown snowballs in their faces, or that he was teaching the smaller children to swear. But Lisbet took his part, and when, afterwards, she was alone with the little scamp—well, what was the use of beating him ?

Then there came a night when Martin was wakened by a great hubbub in the house. It was pitch dark, and again a north-west gale was raging. There were hasty steps on the stairs ; in the room below, people were running about and calling out. Then they rushed out of doors, and he could hear them tearing down to the shore. He tumbled down into the room : Mother Lisbet was still there. “ What's the matter, Mother ? ”

“ There's a wreck in the fjord—but you must go back to bed—you're sick ! ” And off she set after the others, into the darkness and the storm. Little Martin forgot his cough and his hot forehead ; he put on any clothes he could lay hands on, and, in the twinkling of an eye, he was outside and running down to join the rest. Spray and sand were lashed into his face by the storm : down there by the hard where the boat lay the beach was black with people, gazing out over the fjord or running hither and thither and shouting to each other. The sea sent great foaming

rollers crashing up the shore, and, farther away, they could hear it thundering and roaring, out in the black darkness. But through it all ever and again came cries from out in the fjord, and never before had the boy heard such piercing cries.

But here there were none but old men and women, and the boat was only a four-oar. What could they do against such a storm and in such a sea? Old crooked Anders Inderberg was there, at his wit's end like the rest; he could set out lines for small fish in fair weather, and earn a shilling or two, old as he was; but this was a job for young men, and there were no young men there. He ran hither and thither on his stumpy legs, crying out just as if it were he that was clinging to a boat's keel. So did Elias Daber; so did Per Hovedsmann—while the women wailed through the storm: "Great God—listen!" "Listen! There it is again!"

And then Paal Flata put his shoulder against the stem of the boat, looked around him, and called out, "Anyone coming along?" They crowded about him, silent now; but Anders cried: "You'll never get anywhere, Paal: you'll upset before you're a boat's-length from shore. Don't you see it's too ugly for aught?" The others were all with him; they were only old men, broken with rheumatics, and the women looked at them, and could do nothing but wail. But the old man from Flata still stood with his shoulder against the boat, and once more he called: "Will nobody come along?"

The others drew back; some called out: "If only the boat were bigger! Anders, you have a bigger boat. . . ." Anders cried that his boat is in the

boat-house, and, besides, a boat like his is too big to handle in such a sea.

"Well, there's a smaller boat in Kristavar Myran's boat-house—what about that one?"

"Aye, but the boat-house is locked."

"Run for the key, then."

"No—we must be quick, there's no time to waste." So they went on, all shouting at once—and still Paal stood with his shoulder against his boat, and once again he called : "Will nobody come along? If not, I'll go alone."

That would be crazier still! But all at once a woman appeared by his side. It was Martha. Then the skids under the keel were rolling ; and the first sea dashed in over the boat's stern. Then she was afloat, then father and daughter were on board ; the oars were thrust out ; the boat was lifted high on a wave and seemed like to be flung back on the beach ; but the two on board hung to their oars, and the boat vanished in the deep trough behind, and came to sight again on the next great roller, cutting up it on the slant. Martha could pull a good oar ; she had knocked about in boats ever since she was a baby. Each time the boat was tossed into the air, little Martin, standing on the shore, could see how bent the old man was ; and now the wind had torn away Martha's kerchief, and her long hair was loosed, and floated out in the air like a streamer—now they were gone again—now lifted high once more ; and always farther and farther away.

The folks on shore stood dumb at first, staring and staring ; but when the boat was swallowed up in darkness they began running hither and thither, shouting

and waving their arms. Mother Lisbet sat alone on a boulder, looking out into darkness and storm ; and none marked that she was there.

Just then Elias caught sight of little Martin : " Well, if I don't believe that boy is here ! Aren't you sick ? " At last the failure at carpentering had a chance to show what he was made of. The son of the house had likely been lost up at Lofoten, and now the old man himself might quite well go the same way. The house needed a man to keep it going. So he flung the youngster over his shoulder, and hurried off with him to Flata. There he took him indoors, flung him into the bed in the little bedroom, and swore to him that he'd best cover himself up well, and go to sleep, or he'd hear of it. Now the deed was done. Now Elias Daber had been out in the storm and taken his share of the burden, he too. Little Martin dared not go against Elias ; for he'd often seen the old fellow going about the hamlet with a shining knife, gelding little pigs—he was nearly as good at it as a vet. So Martin lay still, coughing and coughing ; went to sleep ; woke again and heard the storm still howling ; then fell more deep asleep, quite overwhelmed by such a night. He saw Father and Martha on the upturned keel—in his dreams he was struggling along with them ; he cried out in terror, but still slept on, coughing in his sleep. But at last he awoke—and wasn't it strange ? it must be sunshine outside. The storm had died down ; the wind was only an angry whistle round the house-corner. And in the big room all was so still, though it must have been far on in the day.

Then the bedroom door opened, and Mother came

in. "Poor little man ; how are you to-day ?" There was peace in her voice, and her face was the same as ever.

"Mother—what happened?" He sat up in his excitement.

"They were saved," she answered, looking out of the window.

"But what about Father and Martha?"

"They were the ones that did it"; and she came over and sat down by him. "It was a sloop from Hemne going north with birch-timber, and there was only the skipper and his son on board. But the poor boy was almost gone."

"Where are they now, then?"

"S-sh! They're all asleep."

The boy wondered a little that Mother wasn't more wrought up over this. She hadn't mentioned the Lord once. She had lived by the sea all her days, and this was the sort of thing one had to take as it came. She had no notion that her man and her daughter had done anything special last night ; there was nobody else that dared go ; and, if Martha hadn't been brave enough, she would have offered to go herself.

Later in the day the boy was so much better that he could kneel up in bed and look out of the window. The fjord lay shining in the March sun, but where the sun didn't reach, the seas still rolled white and grey. On the beach lay an overturned sloop, her mast stretched across the sand ; over the clumsy hull the rollers broke in showers of foam and spray. It was almost as if a whale had been driven ashore. But all round the water's edge was a yellow wreath of planks, rising and sinking with the waves, and, out on the bay,

thousands of scattered pieces of wood gleamed yellow, as they rocked about, or were heaved up and down. It was as if the sea had found a plaything ; it was just like a cat playing with a mouse. Over there a wave tossed a dozen sticks high up on the sands, where they lay high and dry, and thought themselves safe ; but, the next moment, the Old One was back again, dragging them back with her, always farther and farther out ; then they were edged quietly back to shore and began to settle down as if they would stay there ; but they'd reckoned without the waves—they swept down on them once more—they didn't tire of their fun so quickly. It was fair weather now ; the sea was in good humour—and surely one might play now and then, even if one were only a sea !

Toward evening strange voices were heard in the room. The boy stole to the door, and looked through a crack. There sat the skipper, big and black-bearded, in Father's Sunday clothes, much too small for him ; and there was the boy—not yet grown up, sure enough—in Per's clothes, much too big for him. Martin stared at this strange youngster. His hair was quite dry already, though only last night he was in the deep sea.

He had barely got back to bed when Martha came in to fetch a skein of yarn hanging on the wall. Her hair was combed and braided again, and pinned up in place, but he remembered how it streamed out in the storm last night. And in a quite everyday voice she said : “ Mother, was it the black or the white skein ? ”

“ It’s the white one,” came Mother’s voice from the big room—and it, too, sounded quite as usual.

Presently the skipper had to go out into the village

and hire helpers to gather up the wood from the fjord and the beach ; and the worst of it was that little Martin's cough and headache were so bad that it was impossible for him to go along, too.

But in two or three days the sloop had been repaired and refloated, and the wood loaded on board. And now the boy was so much better that he was sitting up in the chimney-corner as the skipper stood in the room with his pocket-book, ready to settle up.

The accounting was simple enough. Paal chewed and chewed. He didn't half like it, but, like the other helpers, he had to take sevenpence a day for the salvage work ; and Mother Lisbet said it would be sixpence a day for bed and board, and half price for the boy.

The skipper smiled a little as he paid ; but he still stood there with the pocket-book in his hand. They looked at him. He cleared his throat, and at last he got out : " But does that square us ? "

The old man went on chewing—he didn't understand. " Square us ? Aye—doesn't it ? We haven't taken too much, have we ? "

" But what about the boy's life and mine ? Surely we owe you a bit for them, too ? "

Paal Flata looked at his old woman, and she at him, and Martha sat at her carding and smiled to herself. If only Father didn't go off into one of his rages !

" I don't take money for saving folks' lives," he said. " We're poor, but things aren't so bad as all that."

" And what about the girl then ? There's a woman for you ! " The skipper went over to Martha and held out two ten-shilling notes.

She looked at him, flushing. "Put up your money," she said. "You've lost quite enough as it is." Then the silly fellow began to talk about getting the Sheriff to apply for a life-saving medal! Paal Flata laughed this to scorn, without knowing in the least what it meant. If he'd offered him a half-pound of tobacco now!

So the skipper and his boy had just to speak their thanks and shake hands all round.

IX

MILK ran short in the house. The big, red-flanked Kranslin, with the white head and the beautiful horns, was to calve very soon, and the other cow was a young heifer that had only just been to the bull. But you can do with water both for porridge and cake if you only put in a spoonful of syrup in the mixing. This was no new thing for the Flata folk, nor, for that matter, for others in the hamlet. But then, to make up, they had something to look forward to—when the big cow had dropped her calf and could let loose her yellow streams of milk. Mother Lisbet put her wooden milk-pans in water, to swell and grow water-tight against the time when they were needed, and little Martin was always over in the byre, and could talk of nothing but curds of beestings.

And then one day Lame Marja went hobbling from house to house with a big piece of news. Spring was on the way ; above her the sky was all wide blue spaces framed in soft clouds. The sea basked in the mild weather ; there was a smell of seaweed, of green scum and sand, and of the dung-heaps by cow-shed walls—the very smell of spring. And when the tide was out, seagull, seapie, redshank and peewit sat on the shingle squawking one louder than the other about how warm the sun was to-day.

Lame Marja said the same when she stopped at a hut, leaning upon her crutch. What blessed weather—at last ! And none too soon, after such a winter. So

much she managed for preface, and then her news burst out. "Some folks won't have too good a time, though, these days," she said. "Like the Flata people, now—they got a lawyer's letter yesterday." Then she wiped the corners of her mouth, enjoying the effect of her news. Every time the listeners were struck dumb. A cold shudder ran down their backs. It's bad enough when the bailiff comes with a writ for debt, but a lawyer's letter is worse—everyone knows, of course, that that means you may be turned out of house and home.

"No! Surely you can never mean that."

"Ah, yes, God-a-mercy on us! Thomas Klypa's boy came there with the letter yesterday."

"But do they owe money in the city, then?"

"Maybe—who knows? They do say that son-in-law of theirs is just about going to smash. Well, well—Good-bye! No, thanks—I won't stop longer to-day."

And she hobbled on with the news. The neighbours stood in their windows and looked toward Flata, where mischance had come on a visit. The grey, lop-sided house lay there looking so sad, it was as if the sun couldn't warm it. No smoke went up from the roof; one might think the letter had put out the fire on the hearth.

It was the bank that had set the lawyers on them, and early that morning the old man had put on his Sunday clothes and had gone to talk to the managers. The womenfolk saw him coming back again down across the field. As he came in they gazed at him. For a while he stood by the door; then he took off his hat slowly and hung it on the wall.

FOLK BY THE SEA

"How did it go?" asked Mother Lisbet.

"It went badly," he answered. "Peter has had loan after loan from them, and, now that he's gone bankrupt, they're raking in all they can for themselves."

"Couldn't you get them to give us time?"

"I would have to find a surety, they said, else the lawyer'll put both the bailiff and the Sheriff on to us."

It was very still in the room. Little Martin was playing with the cat, but he stopped and crept into the chimney-corner. The old man went over and sat down on the bench by the table. There was food there waiting for him, but he did not look at it. Mother Lisbet began weaving again.

"Poor Anna," she said.

"Aye—and what about us?" He gave a harsh laugh.

"Oh! We'll find some way out."

"Well, let's hear your way!—I see none."

Martha went on with her sewing; she looked up now and then, but she did not venture to speak.

"If only we could get hold of Gjert," sighed Mother Lisbet.

"Do you think we don't owe him enough already?" answered the old man.

It was quite true. It wasn't only the gifts they had had from him, but they had borrowed thirty shillings from him last winter to pay the taxes and their debt at the village store. If only Per had earned something that winter at Lofoten—but there had been next to no fish, and he had gone off now to the Finnmark fishing, so that he shouldn't come home empty-handed. But when would he come? Nobody could tell—not now, at any rate.

After a little while the old man said: "I see no other way but——"

Mother Lisbet stopped weaving and waited.

"I see no other way but—but the milch cow——"

"Not—not Kranslin! Oh, Paal, you can never mean that, surely." Paal sighed, but he laid his clenched fist on the table before him. "I won't have the bailiff here. We must get along without milk."

Martha looked up and gazed at him. The boy in the chimney-corner began to whimper.

"Rather than that I'll go in and get Gjert," said Lisbet firmly.

"I won't have that. We may need to go to Gjert another time."

He got up with a bitter laugh. "Aye, aye—she's done well for herself, our Anna." Then he walked out slowly, stooping even more than usual.

They could feel in the air that the thing was settled. It was as though he had set his teeth and determined to strip himself so that all should see what a fine son-in-law they had.

This day, too, Mother Lisbet took the cow a bucket of warm water that had been passed through a sieveful of hay, and in the evening she went her usual slow walk across to the byre to tend the beasts. When she had given them their fodder, and the sound of chewing went up all round, she stood a while with her hand on Kranslin's back. She did not sigh; she only looked straight in front of her. There were times when something came over her so that she saw farther than her everyday wont, and then nothing was quite certain any more. Could it be that this—or this—or, in especial that—or——? The boy Martin stood by

the pigsty, wondering why the old woman was standing there so long. At last she said quietly, "Aye, aye, Kranslin!"

There was a cattle-dealer in the district called Jo Haugen, of whom people said that when the men were away at the fishing he went round among the women-folk, tricking them out of their cows and sheep for next to nothing. He came lumbering down to Flata one day, fur cap on head, knapsack on back and staff in hand—everyone said he could smell it far off when there were cattle for sale anywhere. First he was over a while in the cattle-shed, feeling the milch cow all over, and, after that, he sat down in the room and lit a pipe and began complaining bitterly of the wretched prices that milch cows were fetching just now.

Paal was in a bad temper and wouldn't stay indoors. This was a thing for his old woman to settle; he hadn't forgotten the time when he had been to town to sell the pig. But God help her if the deal didn't come off; that lawyer's letter had put such terror into him that he would scarcely have a wink of sleep until every penny was paid.

And how should Lisbet know how to bargain with a fellow like this? He offered such a miserable sum—but, of course, what he said was true enough—it *would* cost quite a lot if she took the cow to town herself. When, at last, he raised his offer a little, making it just enough to pay their part of the bank debt, she dared not stand out any longer.

The heavy cow was brought out, and led off by her halter, following the strange man slowly. Her udder hung full and heavy, and the brass buttons on her horns shone in the spring sun. As they went up across

the field she turned round two or three times and lowed, and her daughter, the heifer in the byre, answered, fretting after her.

Little Martin followed, up to the gate. In the room Martha sat, trying to sew, but every little while the needle stopped. Mother Lisbet went in and out between the living-room and the kitchen, and busied herself with her work.

Then she looked through the window : "If only she can stand being shipped to town so near her calving time. You must take the old rug, Martha, and run after them, and tell him to put it over her when they get on board. Sometimes the sea washes over the fore-deck where the cows have to stand." So Martha got up and found the rug, and started off.

Mother Lisbet went slowly up to the well where the wooden milk-pans had been put to swell and tighten up, ready for use. Now she took them out, and brought them down again. . . . A wreck in the fjord one day, a bank that strips you bare the next—one must take things as they come. And even if there's no meaning in it all, they that have sense must use the sense they have.

When Martha came back the mother said quietly : "I think you'd best go to the store again and fetch a tin of syrup ; we haven't any left, and we can't do with just plain water for the porridge." Little Martin had taken refuge in the byre ; he took the little stool that Mother sat upon when she milked, and moved it into the empty stall. There he sat down. He felt a sorrow that was different from anything he had known before, and he didn't want to show it to Mother. It made him feel strangely grown-up. It was bad enough

that they should come and take away the lovely cow he was such friends with, but it was worse that people should be so bad to Father and Mother. He didn't quite understand who the people were, but it seemed to him it must be almost everybody. Was *this* what they were like?

But Paal set off for the peat-bogs with the sled, and he called in on Elias Daber, and got him to go with him.

One day Martha was out with her father wheeling seaweed up from the beach, and spreading it on the near-by strip of field; for seaweed is a rare good manure, if only the spring is wet, so that it rots it into the earth in good time.

All at once she cried, "Oh, but——!" And she stood there staring.

"Who is it?" The old man straightened up, leaning on the pitchfork he was spreading the seaweed with.

A man and a woman came walking along the beach. He was dark-bearded, tall, and loosely built, and he carried a box slung upon his back with a rope. But the woman with the cloak on her arm—surely it must be Anna, though she looked so much stouter.

"Good gracious!—here are visitors coming," said Martha.

Now they were quite near by. There was no doubt any longer. "Bless the work!" said Peter Norset, and Anna said the same. Martha saw at once that her sister was going to have a child—so it's no wonder her face was grey and flecked with blue patches.

"So you're out visiting!" said Paal, trying to smile; but somehow he didn't sound as hearty as he would

like. For this son-in-law of his had ruined Anna, too.

"Aye," said Peter; "here we are out walking. So things go."

They hadn't talked long when the old man said they must come up to the house and come in; and the four of them went up together toward the grey home-stead. They talked of what an early spring it was, and Peter said that in the south the sowing and planting were in full swing.

Anna looked at the little weather-worn hut, that closed one eye against the western heaven. She thought to-day that it looked like Mother—perhaps Mother would find some way out this time, too.

So these two, so lately the owners of a big farm of their own, stopped by the porch of this poor man's home that was now to take them in, a pair of homeless wanderers.

Then they went in. Lisbet was sitting over by the loom; she had not seen them coming, and now she suddenly stiffened. "Why, great heavens——!"

"Good day, Mother!" Anna shook hands, but, though she looked at her mother, her little face was set hard.

"Good day," said the son-in-law too, flushing over his forehead as he tried to smile.

They sat there in the room and looked at each other. All of them knew pretty well what had happened, but Peter made it plain; he told them at once that he was sorry to say they came there as beggars. The man he had bought the farm from, who held a mortgage on the whole place, had forced him to sell out, and all the birds of prey had swooped down upon him, one after another, and it didn't take long to pluck him bare.

The only things they owned now were the clothes they stood up in, and some little things in the chest and basket.

"Did they take the chest of drawers too?" asked Mother Lisbet.

"Yes, every stick we had—worse luck! A lawyer has no mercy." Peter Norset took out his pipe and filled it, and lit up, filling the room with the scent of good tobacco. He did not start in on a long defence, nor hold forth about what scoundrels the others were; he simply told the whole thing as a great event. At last he looked at his father-in-law. "And I'm afraid you were caught too as surety," he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

"That's paid up," said Mother Lisbet, and at last she came forward away from her loom.

"Oh, you'll get that back, of course," said Peter confidently; but Anna looked at him, with a dry little cough.

But, after all, they were strangers on a visit, and you couldn't offer them everyday food to start with. Martha had to go to Rönningen and borrow a can of milk, and Mother Lisbet must even bring out her eggs and break them to make pancakes. If only Peter hadn't been such a hearty eater.

"But what are you thinking of doing now?" asked Paal, looking at his son-in-law.

Peter returned his look and answered, "First and foremost, we've come to ask if we can lodge here for a while."

"You're not going up the dale?" asked Paal again, looking round the room. "There isn't much room here for lodgers."

"Up the dale? Home to Mother—and the others? Oh, no! That won't be just yet—oh, no!" And Peter smiled at the very thought.

Mother Lisbet had heard all this through the open kitchen door; now she put her head a little way into the room and exchanged glances with the old man. Then they both looked at Anna. There she was, close upon her time.

"We-e-ll—if you'll take things as you find them," said Paal, with a sigh. Then he got up and went slowly out.

When a little home that's pinched for everything has visitors that are worse off still, it is strange how well-off it grows all at once. Mother Lisbet set to work to get bedclothes together, and, when she'd cleared up the little room, the bed she made there for the two was almost like a best bed; and the ham that hung in the kitchen loft turned out to have much more on it than she had thought, so that one could cut and come again without its making so very much difference. And the old man remembered that there was a quarter-keg of fat split herrings in the lean-to, and now he got out a chisel and prised it open. There couldn't be much owing at the village store now, either, so one might get coffee and sugar on credit again—just until Per came home.

X

So the two stayed on at the little croft. Anna was expecting every day to be brought to bed, and the parents told her she mustn't think of moving till it was all over. Peter went in and out, with nothing to do, but every now and then he would stand out in the field pondering. He was right down under water now, and he needed some time to get his head out again. He was ashamed to stay here and be a burden to these poor cotters, but wherever he might turn he could see no way out. Perhaps he might get money from his mother to help him over to America, but it went against the grain to sneak away from it all like that. He had brought loss on a number of people hereabouts, and it would be a strange thing if he were not man enough to get on his feet again, and pay back everything he owed.

At last he made up his mind to start a country store, and he went round to his acquaintance in the farming district to find out if they would help him to make a start. He was neither proud nor humble when he came to them ; he looked people in the eyes, and told exactly how things stood. Things had gone all wrong with him, and he must shoulder the blame himself ; but now he firmly believed that he had his feet on solid ground again. People listened to him, and he was treated to coffee and food everywhere ; but no sooner did he mention what he was really after than their eyes

grew scared, and he came back to Flata in the evening no further on than when he had left.

He filled his pipe with good tobacco, and smoked, and sniffed, and put up with the glances that both Anna and Mother Lisbet gave him. He tried going out with the others to work on the patches of tillage, but to stand there hacking away with a mattock at a little bit of land that a harrow would break up in five minutes was more than he could bring himself to do. The old man would have the soil of his barley-field powdered so fine you would think it was for porridge or pudding he wanted it. Was he, Peter Norset, not fit for better things than this? He sank into a depression that kept him awake while the others slept. Back came that lay-preacher who had lectured him so in the south, when he had lain in bed after a spree. Now the preacher went at it hammer and tongs. Yes, he was tired, dead tired of running round like a half-blown townsman with a knapsack on his back, and coffee and brandy inside to keep him going. He saw himself going about neglecting both his wife and his work, thinking, early and late, of nothing but making money by one venture or another. He agreed with the lay-preacher that it was high time an end was made of this fellow. He thought and thought of all the people he had dragged in with him, and the thought really stung him. Never in this life should he have gone and fooled himself away down south.

Then he began to remember what a fine life he had when he was a lad up in the dale. He saw himself master again at Norset: was it too late? Yes, but that couldn't prevent his longing to be there again. There was something within him that began to search

and search for a way back—home. He even felt inclined sometimes to ask forgiveness of his mother and his brothers and sisters. For suppose they were right after all. He wandered in thought up the dale, and it was like a penitential pilgrimage. No doubt he would have to make that pilgrimage some day, even if the way was hard, and only when it was ended would he, perhaps, see his way again. However far behind the times everything up there might be, at least it was all honest and safe, and, after all, it was there that he belonged. Home? Yes, but hadn't he made himself homeless? Could it be put right again? Was there no way out at all? He knew that the two brothers, Ola and Nils, had divided the farm between them, and that his mother was living on a pension. Their faces would be a sight if he turned up there one day. He could take the farm back again as allodial heir, but that would cost money; it would cost many hundreds of pounds. Did he have it? Could he raise it? Perhaps he might; by taking chances again, and, possibly, winning—in fact by beginning to speculate again. But did he want to do that? And would anyone help him to do it?

"*You must get up now,*" said Anna, as he lay there stretching himself in bed long after the others had gone to work.

"I have such a headache," he said, and turned to the wall.

"Oh, well, if you have a bit of a headache, you won't die of it I dare say."

"A bit of a headache!" he mimicked. "I have a really bad headache"; and he pulled the rug over his head and lay still.

He had a breakfast of porridge and watered syrup to look forward to, and then a long day of loafing about in idleness. Talk about punishment! He was not only shut up, but put on bread and water too; and the shame of it was just as great as if he were really in jail.

Mother Lisbet and Anna were alone in the house one day. The little room was full of sun. The old woman was weaving, and the daughter was sewing baby clothes. They had been silent for a time, but at last the mother let her shuttle sink and looked through her spectacles at Anna for a little while.

Anna lifted her eyes as if trying to see what her mother was thinking.

"There's one thing you must tell me, Anna. But perhaps it's too difficult?"

"Oh, no, I don't expect so."

After a while the mother began again. "Were you really so very fond of Peter that time?"

Anna looked down and sighed, but she went on with her sewing.

"Or was it—aye, you must forgive me—but was it to—to help us because we were so poor?"

There was silence again. At last Anna answered: "I was so young, Mother. I've wondered about it myself sometimes. But, anyway, it's too late to puzzle over it now."

Then Mother Lisbet went on with her weaving again.

The child came—a boy—and Mother Lisbet was very busy as grandmother. It was the first grandchild, and it's no small thing when such a little being comes into a house. Even Paal tramped in and out

all the time, and made a great occasion of it. Who else was it that came in with a new cradle on his back, and put it down in the middle of the floor? It was true enough that Elias Daber had taken his oath he'd never do any carpentering for people again, but tobacco stalks are tobacco stalks, and Paal knew how to get round folks when he wanted to. Here's a bed for the baby!

One day a man in south-wester and sea-boots came across the field. It was Per, who had been at the Finnmark fishing all the spring, and was back at last with three or four pounds in his pocket. He looked grown-up and self-reliant; he had grown a brown beard, and he wore a look which said that the whole thing rested upon him, now. There lay the old buildings, as tumble-down as ever; they'd got the spring sowing and planting out of hand, it seemed; but how much debt, he wondered, have they run up at the village store?

He knew all about Anna, and he remembered how he envied her when he thought she had done so well for herself. He remembered when the suitor from the farm stood there, and promised that Flata should one day feed both horse and cattle. Aye, aye! And now Per was in the porch; now he opened the door and entered. "Gracious me!" came from the room, which was full of people. "Why! Is it you, Per? Welcome home!"

First he looked at his mother and father, and then at that fine farmer, who had risen from his seat, and seemed quite to fill the little room.

"Good day!" he said to them all; and he could not help feeling after all that it was good to be home again.

Coffee and food were brought to him at once, and he wondered why the coffee was black. "Hasn't Kranslin calved yet?" he asked. They looked at one another, but nobody answered. Anna bent over the child, and her face flushed. It was little Martin who blurted out the news that Kranslin was sold. Then Per threw back his head and stared at them. But he went on eating, and said no more.

It was in the kitchen that Mother Lisbet had to come out with the truth; and he stood there and listened with clenched teeth. He had never seen his mother's eyes look frightened before. For a while he was silent, but at last he laughed a little. "So Anna *did* get a cow from home, after all," he said, and went slowly out.

Soon he began to find it unpleasant at home. The house was full of people that he had to provide for. He would have liked to go off and escape from it all; for, of course, he couldn't turn them out.

Then, one day, a gig came jogging down from the highroad, with old Ingeborg Norset sitting in it. The driver was not one of her sons, but a farm lad; and nobody at the farm knew she meant to go farther than the country store.

Mother Lisbet and the old man went out, and, at last, Peter went too. She greeted them all, and they helped her down from her high seat; then she leaned on her staff, and looked round on them all, and looked at their little home, where she had never set foot before. Now her son was living here on charity, he and his wife and child.

"Aye—it was you I wanted to speak to," she said to Peter.

Yes, but wouldn't she come in? At first she said no, she would rather not; but, in the end, she thought better of it. She and the cotter's wife stood facing one another; she herself so small and dried-up, the other so tall, so strong and bony. Well, well—she might just look in for a moment, after all.

Her first grandchild, too! She couldn't hold out against that. She must needs hobble over to the cradle, and, without her knowing it, her face grew strangely soft as she stood peeping at the little boy. There was some talk about babies between the two grandmothers, and while it was going on, Martha, in the kitchen, had to take some more of the eggs and make pancakes, and the boy Martin ran round to the neighbours to borrow a cup of cream and a bit of butter. The table was laid, with a cloth upon it: the old lady from Norset looked at it, and she felt she would be lowering herself if she didn't drive off at once. But before she could turn round she was sitting at the table, and there was no denying that the food tasted good after her long drive.

At last she and her son were alone out in the yard. "And you're staying on here with your wife and child?" she said.

"Well, I must stay somewhere, Mother."

"And you're not ashamed, either?"

"Is that what you came to ask me?"

"I came to ask you if you would pack up your traps and come home. It's a disgrace for all of us to have you staying on here!"

"Is it my brothers that have sent you?"

"I came on my own account; I'm well enough off to be able to spare a bite of food for you and yours."

This was just what Peter had been waiting for, but he wasn't going to knuckle under and accept charity at the first offer.

"I can't give you an answer at once," he said.

"Can't you? Are you waiting till you've eaten them out of house and home?"

"Maybe I'll hit upon something else!"

"I dare say! And it'll be as much good as the other things you've hit on."

"Did you come here to make bad worse, Mother?"

"I came because I am your mother; whatever sort of a muddle you may get yourself into, I can't get away from that." She was very nearly crying.

"You should have thought of that before," answered Peter.

In the end she had to drive away without anything being settled. He went with her up to the gate, and stood there looking after her. Her back grew smaller and smaller as the gig went up the road. So now she had proved that she was right. His brothers and sisters could jeer at him the whole day long. All their dealings with him in the past were justified now; he alone was in the wrong. Well, no doubt he would have to go on that penitential pilgrimage, and admit it, and humble himself and beg to be taken back as one of them—and promise to be a good boy ever after. Could he make up his mind to it? Well, he might just as well make up his mind to that as to anything else. In the night it seemed possible, but in the light of day it was not quite the same thing.

It wasn't the pleasantest thing in the world to be here at Flata, either. And so the inclination to go up to the farm grew and grew. To go slowly up through

the dale under a hail of venomous glances from every farm—he had nothing against that. It was a self-torture he was beginning to hanker for. When he had stuck it out he would doubtless find his feet again. It was only that he did not want to go at the first word from his mother.

The warm days came ; the cotters found the where-withal to get the boy baptised, and now both Anna and the child must surely be strong enough to move. But when he spoke of it to her she looked at him in terror. Go up to the old woman at Norset, and to the others there—now, after all that had happened ! “ You’ll never get me to do it,” she said.

“ Oh, no ! ” he smiled. “ But I shall go—and I think you’ll come with me.”

And the day came when they set out, he with the box tied on his back with a rope ; she with the child in her arms well wrapped up. He might likely have had a horse down from Norset, but he had no mind to ask a favour of his brothers, and, if he were to drive, it would not be a penitential pilgrimage. It did not occur to him that Anna had nothing to do with all this, and yet had to bear as heavy a burden as he. Mother Lisbet went with them part of the way, and took turns with Anna in carrying the child.

It was a journey that neither of them forgot. They passed the church where they had once stood before the altar ; they looked out over the prosperous countryside through which they had driven with their bridal train only a few years ago. They reached the bridge—it was in order now, so there was no need to use the ferry. Here, for the first time, they sat down to rest. Peter smoked a pipe, sniffing now and then.

It was a pity Anna should have to wipe her eyes so much, but there were things one had to go through—at least, he had to.

They went on again, and presently they met people from up the dale driving carts loaded with empty barrels; men who knew them, and who said "Good day," and hastened past so as to laugh at their ease. Peter Norset's nose was not quite so high in the air to-day; he was little better than a tramp. Well, such was life; and they certainly had no mind to pity him.

Later in the day the two came into the dale, and began to pass farms where people were hard at work in the fields near the roadside. The workers straightened their backs and stared. "Bless the work!" said Peter, and walked slowly by. He would give them good time to stone him with their glances. He saw the children running from house to house, and the windows filling with faces. At almost every big farm there was a girl that had an account to settle with him. They were getting their own back now. They had their revenge now—and it was all as it should be. Sometimes there's a satisfaction in taking a thrashing, and this sort of satisfaction Peter was out after to-day. Anna walked heavily; she clenched her teeth and looked away when they met anyone: but Peter had enough to do making up his own account.

They sat down again when they reached Foss. The roar of the river tumbling over the falls was just the same as before; the heights and the mountains round were all the same. Peter wiped the sweat from his brow. The box was heavy. He sweated out both the cattle dealer and the politician, and Johan Sverdrup and all his Liberalism. No doubt there would be

enough of him left to make a dales farmer. He looked at these out-of-date farms with their backward methods. Well, that was just the way to run them. What's the use of making a splash with machines and artificial manures when all it leads to is debt and bankruptcy? It is the outcome that matters. The old farmers here knew that. And he knew it too, *now*. If you keep to the Bible and the savings-bank book you're on safe ground—your house won't fall downhill. Peter lit a fresh pipe, sniffed, and looked on while Anna tended the baby.

They passed by the mileposts where their wedding-party had stopped to let the drinks go round. They sat down by them to rest, but they made no mention of the wedding. Mother Lisbet had sent food with them for the journey, and they took it out, and sat and ate by the roadside. People drove and walked past them—they must think what they chose.

The twenty miles dragged out endlessly. It was harder to get up again each time. They met a man with a milch cow, and Peter could not help stopping to ask how prices were now. But the man knew him, and went on his way.

The box was no light one, and, as its weight pressed more and more, the whole affair began to weigh heavy on him. The next time they stopped to rest he looked at Anna, and realised how worn out she was, in both mind and body. Then he took everything upon himself. "Aye, aye, Anna," he said—and there was almost a catch in his throat—"this is hard going; but we must go through with it. I've sinned against you, too. But things are going to be better one day."

He offered to carry the child for the rest of the way.

FOLK BY THE SEA

She did not answer him, but pulled herself together and went on as before. Late in the evening they had come so far that they could see right across to Norset, and here Peter stopped and gazed at the place. There was a new farmstead a little way off from the old one. Nils, the youngest brother, the blacksmith and wag, had been given this land—Hans had married into a farmer's family in Vestvaagen, on the other side of the mountain. And the boy Nils had wasted no time. He wasn't twenty yet, and he'd had a hard job to pass the priest for confirmation—and there lay his farmstead, all its houses complete.

At that moment Peter asked himself what, in reality, he'd come up here for. To take it all back, under the laws of inheritance? But that wouldn't be doing penance.

In the Norset fields the brothers and sisters were working with their farm folk on the spring sowings. As they straightened up to rest they saw Peter and Anna coming; but after glancing at one another they made haste to get to work again.

The old lady of Norset stood in the room, staff in hand, to receive them. "Poor thing, you must be dead tired," she said to Anna, and took the baby from her. It was the first time she had said a kind word to her son's wife.

Peter's mother had no separate quarters set aside for her. She still had her meals with the others, and most of the time she stayed in the little bedroom. But in the bedroom loft a bed and a cooking-stove had been made ready. Their food they must get from the storehouse from her special share, and they would have to cook it for themselves, in the loft.

XI

So Peter Norset was home again. But things were not quite what he was used to. When the others went to meals along with their mother, he had no right to go with them—and, at first, it was not easy to get accustomed to this. He was the eldest son of the house, but he was homeless here now, except in the bedroom loft. When Anna wanted to get ready a meal, she had to go to the old lady every time and ask for what she needed. And the old woman looked at her, sighing, and measured out just enough for their needs, and no more—it was clear that *she* hadn't much to spare either. She had two cows of her own that the people on the farm milked for her, and, morning and evening, Anna had to go down into the kitchen with a can and ask how much milk she might have. She felt, always, as if she were going to the Relief Officer : she wished that she could do without eating ; Peter had such an appetite, he ate enough for both of them.

Peter had not known that his brother Ola was married. He had brought home a big, strapping woman, as black of hair as Ola himself was red, and now she swept in and out as mistress of Norset, and must needs do everything herself, though she was expecting a little one. One day she asked her husband if Peter and that woman were to stay on here as parish paupers ; and when Anna's baby cried she would come up the stairs and say that if this howling was to go on, night and day, it would drive her crazy. It

FOLK BY THE SEA

was clear that they could not stay here : but where could they go ?

Peter still had times when he looked on himself as the future master of Norset. He spoke with a certain air of authority to both his brothers and his sisters, and he went over to Nils's new place and sat down with a pipe and bragged about how smart the boy had been to get all his houses built and ready so quickly. Nils had his own farm servants already, and his own cattle—he was a full-blown farmer with a new farm ; and he listened to his brother, not ill pleased. Praise from a man who knew all about it was most welcome of course ! Peter did not mind sneering and jeering from Nils or the others. He talked calmly with them, and held himself upright ; but he understood, of course, that if he and they had been far apart in the past they were miles farther now.

He offered to help with the work on the farm, but both the brothers said that they had help enough. Then he went about to the neighbours, putting out feelers to see if anyone would help him to get hold of a farm up here, even if it were only a small one. But if he had never met angry eyes before, he met them now. The greybeards had old scores to settle with him, both because of their daughters and for his radical views. If it was a disgrace to Norset that he had made such a marriage, it was a disgrace to the whole dale that he had made such a fool of himself, and ruined both himself and others. They would never forgive him for that, and they told him so right out.

Then the mood of depression settled on him more heavily than ever. He had come home, but he knew that he would soon be hounded away again.

Where should he go? Never had he felt himself so closely bound as now to this country of his home. He wandered out in the woods and the fields, and sometimes he would sit down upon a stone or a stump, just looking about him, lost to everything but a feeling of content that he hadn't yet been driven away.

The autumn came, and he was still going about idle; the winter came, and every day his mother looked more and more as if she were being stripped bare. In the end he took day-labourer's jobs on the farms; the pay was small, but he got his food and a few pence for tobacco. And when he was away Anna tried to live on nothing. The worst of it all was that Anna was going to have another child. She had grown so hollow-cheeked and thin that you would scarcely know her again.

Peter Norset no longer tried to think about what he should take up next. The whole thing had got to be too much for him; he saw no way out; what he wanted most was to lie down and let the days go by.

One evening late in the spring young Nils saw his brother Ola in the fields some way off; he slouched over to him and started to talk.

"Peter has a good time, hasn't he?" And his round face was one broad grin. "He doesn't have to do a hand's turn; lives like the yolk in an egg, doesn't he—without lifting a finger?"

The other man grunted a little, and half closed his weak eyes as he looked up at the bedroom lost of his farm.

"Well, as long as Mother lives I suppose we'll have to put up with it."

"But d'you know what he said at Tröa the other

day—that Norset farm will be his again some time?"

The other gasped. "Nonsense!" he said at last.

"He has a right by law to take the farm from both of us."

"Aye, but that would cost hundreds and hundreds of pounds!"

"Are you sure that some day he won't get hold of the money?"

"He'll never get it," said the brother. "He owes hundreds already, both here and in the south."

"You never know what he has up his sleeve. He must have something in his head to stay on here as he's doing."

They both looked thoughtfully in front of them awhile, and then they parted. But they had something to turn over in their minds now. And a little fear had crept in; suppose he got hold of the money one day?

Or suppose he had put money aside on the sly, and gone bankrupt just to get rid of his debts? Every time they saw him coming they had a feeling as of misfortune hanging over both farm and folk.

It's a bad thing to have a brother you're ashamed of, but it's worse to have one who may take you by the throat at any minute. They weren't so keen any longer on getting him away; for it would be still worse when they could no longer keep an eye upon him.

But time went by, and nothing happened. One Sunday, when Peter had gone to church, Ingeborg Norset called Ola and Nils out into her little room. She was feeling weak and low, and she wanted to try once more to help Peter while her head was still above

the ground. So now she asked these two who held their father's estate between them if they couldn't let Peter have a piece of land for himself.

The brothers looked at one another. Was it coming now? Had he talked her round?

"What does this mean?" asked Ola, making as if to rise.

"It means what I say; Norset is big enough for three."

"I thought this thing was settled for good and all," said Nils, and he, too, began to get up.

"Remember that he's your brother," the old mother begged. "He'll be content with very little now, Peter will."

After a little while Nils, the humorist, answered: "Perhaps he would like to be a cotter—if he would we could each let him have a bit of ground."

Ola cleared his throat and agreed. It was a pretty desperate proposal; surely the big swell from the south would never agree to it. The old woman gripped the edge of the table with both hands and stared at them. "A *cotter*? Was it a *cotter* you said?"

"Yes, a cotter; we have no land to sell." They sounded as hard as stone—she could not move them.

When they again got up to go, she said, with a catch in her voice: "If he accepts, will you help him to get a roof over his head?"

That they would—if he had money enough to pay them.

Again she looked hard at them. This hatred between her children had burned itself in deeper than she could have thought.

But they were not allowed to go yet. Once more

she tried to plead for the eldest son. "But how can Peter get a house put up, then?" she asked, wiping her eyes.

"Peter?" said Ola. "Why, he must be rolling in money, Mother. Perhaps he'll turn the lot of us out one day; at any rate, he goes about boasting that he will."

"Oh, nonsense! What talk!"

"It's he that does the talking," said Nils, as he opened the door to go.

"If he wants to be a cotter he can come and ask us about it," added Ola, and went out with his brother.

The old lady sat on there, her grey eyes looking dully toward the window. She had shared all she had between the children—she had no power any more to help anyone.

When Peter came into her room in the evening, and heard what the brothers had suggested, he sat quietly smiling a little. "If I had any pride left," he said, "I should be angry, and I'd turn to and give those cubs a hiding. But that's all done with—I've come down in the world, you see, Mother."

So a day came, late in the autumn, when Peter Norset signed a contract as cotter under his two younger brothers. He had a piece of land from each of them, but it lay under the steepest hillsides, and the most of it was unbroken land. For rent he had to work twenty days in the year for each of them.

It was done. Now, at any rate, he would not have to go away again.

He went up to the place, and sat down on a stone, and there he stayed a long, long time. At least nobody could take this away from him, for it didn't

belong to him. Pride must take care of itself when you've come to such a pass that you're at a dead end.

Forty days' forced labour, in return for leave to break in land for his younger brothers. He remembered that night at the sæter when the old crone had come in to him and said, "Beware of that reading, you Peter; it has made beggars of more folks than you."

They had two children now, and Anna was willing enough to be a cotter's wife if only she could get away from the bedroom loft with all speed. But how could they get their house built?

They had to stay on and on in that cramped loft all through that winter and longer still. It was a daily torture; but where could they go? In the spring Peter began work with spade and hoe on the land up under the hill. He broke up the land—for himself to begin with, but in the long run it was for his brothers; every stroke added to the value of the land for them. The sweat ran down, and he felt himself doomed to toil on and on. All the same, the believer in progress wasn't to be sweated out in a day. Thought crowded upon thought, and he had to keep forcing them back all the time. There were plenty of things that weren't as they should be; but it's useless to shy off; you're bound to be tamed one day, and to have to drag the load you're yoked to. Such is life. . . . But how were the elections going? Will Sverdrup get a majority this time? Peter couldn't afford a paper any longer, and nothing came to the farm but the *Mission News*, which the schoolmaster had talked the old lady into taking. But, even so, it was impossible for Peter to break himself of thoughts that went a little beyond

what was just under his nose ; and, in the end, he began to knock about the countryside again. He met people now and again whom he could ask for news, and who would listen to him for a while. He had much to tell about; both of what went on in the south and about the lectures in the city. It was almost like a blood-letting to talk and talk : he was easier and more comfortable for it all over. People listened to this palaverer who had so much time on his hands ; and if he came to a farm he would sit there smoking his pipe, talking and talking, and keeping folks from their work. What they thought of him didn't matter ; he had to give vent to the things that pressed to be uttered. But of course he had to get home again at last, and get to work as a cotter on the farm that by right was his own.

One fine day young Nils, in his turn, brought a girl home, and his wedding was held in fine style. He couldn't get out of asking his own brother ; but when the gifts were going to be announced Peter and Anna went out of the room, and everybody looked after them. They had nothing to give, of course.

When Peter started to work off his rent at hay-making time he kept forgetting that he wasn't the master. His brothers snubbed him, but he only looked at them and laughed. When they were mowing down on the pasture by the river one day, he said to Ola, " You should turn this ground over, Ola, and sow grass-seed ; then there wouldn't be such miles between the grass-blades."

" Yes—you know a lot about it," said the brother,

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and went on with his work. He wasn't taking advice from that quarter.

Another day Ola had told the workpeople to go down and spread out the haycocks on the slopes. When he joined them soon after, the men were mowing, and the women were spreading the grass behind them. "What the devil are you doing here?" he cried out, peering at them with his weak eyes. "Didn't I say that you were to spread out the haycocks?"

"It was I that said we should mow," said Peter; "it's no weather for drying hay to-day."

"Are you the one to give orders here?"

"The one that has some sense must use it!" said the other, laughing; while his brother stood there raging.

It was even worse when he took his turn over at Nils's farm. One evening he went up to the boy and said: "I suppose you've been honest with that wife of yours?" Nils stared at him. "Have you told her that when you get children you won't even be able to teach them the Lord's Prayer?"

"What the devil has that to do with you?"

"Well, you're my brother," Peter teased him, "and I should be sorry if I had to feel ashamed of you."

Nils cursed and abused him, but Peter only smiled.

Yet all the time he kept a careful eye on things, and really meant them well. One day he came leading a young mare into Nils's yard. She was limping badly, and Nils came running toward him to ask what the devil Peter had done to her.

"You tethered the beast so near the ditch that she fell into it, and lay there on her back," said Peter.

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"If I hadn't come along you'd have found her dead."

It sounded likely enough; and Peter had in fact done him a great service, for he was expecting to get a prize for the mare. But to say a word of thanks? The boy stood there gulping; and grew furious because he couldn't get it out. So his thanks turned into: "You're always loafing about the fields, you are."

"Idiot!" said Peter, and went slowly away from him; looking round him as if he were the one who had the responsibility of the whole farm. It was true that he was a lodger there, cribbed in a little loft—and now it looked as if Anna was soon to have a third child. But, in spite of all, he was still the eldest son at Norset.

XII

It was a Saturday night in midsummer, and a group of young fellows of twenty and thereabouts were gathered on the road beneath the Cleft. They were newly shaved and in their Sunday clothes—most of them were just come home from the deep-sea fishing. It was much too fine weather for them to think of going to bed, and Saturday night is Saturday night; but what was there to do? There was no talk of dancing any more—the “godly ones” had seen to that; and as for boys and girls playing games together on the greensward, that, too, led to perdition! But young folks must have fun of some sort, while they are young.

There was nothing for it seemingly but to steal up into the lofts to the girls, when the old people were safe and sound in their beds. But for the whole herd to go off together would be much too noisy a business, and if one stole off alone the others would be sure to follow, just to annoy him. There they stood, looking now at each other, now at the weather—agog for any prank—weather-beaten from the sea air, with silver chains across their vests, and big, sea-swollen hands, most of them tattooed with an anchor. What were they to talk about? If one said something about fishing, it sounded such everyday talk, and the others felt bound to turn his words upside down—to get a laugh out of them.

Per Flata was there with the rest. While the others

had wide-brimmed black hats on their heads, he wore a peaked cap of velvet, with a red patch above the peak, a present from his brother in the city. They looked at the cap, and asked him if he was a sergeant, since he had turned up in uniform. "Go home and go to bed," he said, trying to shut them up. But Jo Aasan, a loose-tongued youngster, retorted, "You'd better go to bed with your boat, she looks so lonely down there on the beach." Per turned away, biting his lip ; he knew this was meant as a taunt. It was true enough, worse luck, that at Flata they had only one poor little tub of a boat, and they hadn't even a boat-house to keep it in.

It had taken a long time for Per really to find his footing among the other young fellows, for he often wore clothes that everyone could see had been inherited from the town brother, and he looked so like a smartly got up stranger in them that the others called him the colporteur. It was worse still when they jeered at him and said he was one of the holy ones, like his parents ; then he would curse and swear and bluster, just to show them that they were lying. He felt a little bad about it afterwards, when he sat with the others at home in the evenings singing hymns ; but comrades are comrades, and he saw things very differently when he was with them. And while it was true that his parents had been found not guilty of the Skaret robbery, the children had become very thin-skinned and suspicious after the affair ; they often winced under taunts, even though meant only in joke.

"You're thinking of Louisa Myran, I see," called out Knut Koya to a tall youngster, Laurits Vikan.

"And I darc say *you* think Marja Trön is lying waiting

ROLE BY THE SEA

for you—but I think I'll go there myself to-night," came the answer. They laughed loudly and stuck their hands in their pockets. Then there was no more to say about that, either. Everything was vague and at a loose end—anything might happen. One after another they sank down on the grassy roadside, and pulled out their pipes. Kal Tunst's jacket bulged a good deal on one side, and now, sure enough, he was pulling out a bottle.

"Is that lye in that bottle?" asked one.

"Yes, do you want a taste?"

"We-ell, if it's good lye." So the bottle was passed round, and one after another wiped its mouth with his hand and took a gulp.

"Tri," spits Laurits; "I always want something salt to eat after brandy!"

"Well, come home with me," said Lars Inderberg; "I've a notion there's a mutton ham in the storehouse." He got up, and the others felt that they might just as well go with him as sit there.

It was getting toward midnight, but mid-winter was near, so it was as light as day. The very hamlet seemed to have fallen asleep; the fjord was still as glass, the seabirds were silent. They drew near to Inderberg under its grey rocky knolls, walking quietly, and speaking in low tones. They were not going to visit the girls; they were only going to steal into the storehouse loft, and cut themselves a slice from a ham. It would be a change at least. They laughed quietly; it was almost as if they were a gang of burglars.

There lay the little storehouse, close under the rock. The other buildings slept, but the storehouse stood on its staddles and seemed to look about. They crept

up the steps as quietly as they could, though there was a little suppressed giggling. Hush! Inside the storehouse they had to climb another ladder. Hush! Just think if the old lady saw them! There were a few innocent mutton hams, hanging from the beams, and now they must put up with having slice after slice carved off with the youngsters' sheath-knives. The young men chewed the salt meat, holding their hands before their mouths so as not to laugh aloud, they found it such fun. You must make the most of this sort of thing, when no bigger mischief offers.

Then one of them said, "Let's go to Naust." They stared at him in surprise. To the big farm, Naust! Look up the daughters there—boys like them from the cotters' hamlet! Was the fellow drunk? But all the same it gave them a feeling of comradeship—the very fact that they were all of them too common for the girls of a big house.

When they were safe out in the open again, one of them suggested that there were dairymaids staying on the stock farms up among the hills. They were likely young wenches; and, though the place was a good ten miles away, that was nothing of a jaunt in weather like this. They locked the storhouse after them and started off. Per Flata didn't feel quite happy, for he'd rather the youngest daughter at Inderberg, Bergitta, didn't get to know that he was running around after other girls. But back down, and let the others think that he was too pious?—never in the world! Rather than that he'd head the whole crowd.

The way led up over wooded ridges; across marsh lands; then up fresh ridges; steadily bearing upward. The grass between the birch stems was wet with dew,

and their feet left dark tracks on it as they passed. The leaves shook down drops of dew on their faces, as the boys elbowed their way forward ; but it only livened them up, and they shouted and ran on. Birds sleeping head under wing were startled and flew up ; the flat land, with all its little houses along the beach, dropped away below them. The shining, sleepy fjord grew ever broader, and beyond it, in the west, the long range of dank, blue mountains, streaked with snow, rose toward the rose-tinted clouds. Here and there the night-sky was striped with fire ; over in the north-west it still kept the sunset glow ; but farther to the east it was reddening already with the coming sunrise. An hour past midnight ; and the sun was ready to make a new start.

They scared up flocks of sheep resting on the pasture ; there was a frightened ting-a-ling of bells, and woolly backs vanished in haste among the leaves. "Love to your mother," called out Jo Aasan. Over on a hillside a herd of horses was lying on a patch of greensward ; dun-coloured, bay and black ; their heads were nodding in sleep, but one of them stood alert, with his nose to the wind. The men stopped to take breath, and the bottle went around. That livened them up. Off again. They went through a bog and got themselves covered with mud ; they waded through brooks and were washed clean again. Ahead of them was still one hill—the last, brown with ling and bare of trees ; a beacon on it pointed skywards. When at last they reached the top, the red disc of the sun was just peeping over the eastern mountains ; it had a few small layers of cloud near by it to set fire to, but everywhere else the deep heavens

FOLK BY THE SEA

were a pale yellow, flecked here and there with sparks of fire like tiny suns. East and west, as far as the eye could see, the ridges were all pure gold. "I'll light my pipe with that there!" said Jo Aasan, pointing to the sun and making as if to put it on top of his pipe-bowl. A few leagues south they got a glimpse of the outer fjord, broad as a sea, where it divided in two branches; now it was a ruddy mirror, and farthest of all, away in the sun's haze, a few shining dots marked where the city lay.

They had to stand and gaze at all this for a moment; then they set off again, over bogs and little hillocks, frightening up ptarmigan and their young as they passed. They tried to catch the young chicks, but they didn't spend much time over it. At last they stood on a hillock, and saw a little tarn among the rounded hills. Around it small farmsteads snuggled on greensward; a dun horse was resting just below one of the houses. These were the stock farms. There were the maids! Hallo!

But just at this moment Jo Aasan sprained his foot and had to sit down. The others gathered about, wanting to know if there was anything much wrong. Oh, well! He made faces and swore a little. He began untying his shoelace; but gave it up, saying it was not worth while. "You go along," he told them. "It won't kill me. I'll sit here and wait. But cut a birch staff for me, will you?"

Well, seeing it was no worse than that, the others agreed to go on, first finding a staff for Jo. But no sooner were they out of sight behind the hillock than he got up laughing. Now he was rid of them.

For the last half-hour it had been running in his

head that, come what may, he must get off on an adventure of his own. He must turn back, for he had set his heart on getting into Martha Flata's room to-night, if he had to break the window in. This blond rascal had the name of being a great lady-killer; but nobody could get into the loft at Flata. And last Sunday when he saw Martha at church--good Lord! what a beauty the girl looked! You could eat her off a silver spoon, as the saying goes.

He ran down over the hills. He had tried and failed so often at Flata to get the barred door open, but to-night, to-night! This time, devil take it, we should see!

There was the fjord again, with the sunrise over all; blue here and yellow there; down in the water the mountains were standing on their heads--no doubt it would do them good to have a dip. Gulls and sea-pies were sitting on the stones down on the beach, piping out that it was going to be a fine day. But the hamlet slept; all the small, grey huts slept. It was only two o'clock when at last he hurried over the first fields of the village.

It was strange to approach such a little home in sunlight, and to know that the people inside were lying in the deep sleep of the night. Round about the hamlet there were plenty of windows facing this way, but nobody was at them to see him. Outside the little byre stood a wheelbarrow, waiting to be used; a few bits of linen hung on a line to dry; perhaps they were Martha's shifts; a bucket, with its handle in the air, stood upon the door-stone. But the door was shut.

He knew it was through the kitchen that he must go, and he pulled off his shoes, for now he must go

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softly. Then he took hold of the latch, very carefully. No doubt there was a big iron hook inside. But, what the devil was this? The door gave inwards. It was hung on withy hinges, and they squeaked—the brutes! But the opening need not be so very big before a man could edge his way in. To-night they had forgotten to bar the door.

Outside, the sun was rising: flies hummed. But the hamlet slept.

would draw away into the chimney-corner and cry.

The old people looked at one another. Martha was not the first, and she wouldn't be the last, but that did not make their misfortune any lighter. Paal couldn't understand how the fellow had got in. But there were times when Lisbet sat long over in the byre with her hands idle in her lap, for she knew who it was that once and again had forgotten to fasten the door-hook. God be merciful to her.

One day Paal shaved and put on his Sunday clothes, and set out through the hamlet, stick in hand. It was easy to see that he was out on important business, but in his heart he felt strangely abashed. It wasn't because people were looking at him so queerly in these days ; rather because he remembered what he had been like as a young fellow, and now he was going off to bluster and preach at a youngster.

He walked into the room at Aasan, and found the people sitting at a meal. No, he wouldn't sit down ; he would like to have a word at once with Jo. Jo blushed crimson ; he put down his spoon, and went with Paal out behind the cattle-shed. There they stood and looked at one another, and Paal shifted from foot to foot and asked if the other meant to marry the girl. Jo put his hands in his pockets, and wriggled uncomfortably ; he hadn't made up his mind about it, he said—and no more could be wrung from him. The old man felt he wasn't up to giving him a beating, but he ground his teeth and growled out, " You young goat, you ! "

" What about yourself when you were young ? " said Jo with a laugh.

That struck home.

In a little while Paal found himself on the homeward way : but now he was still more bent than before, and his feet dragged along heavily. . . . Well, no doubt that's how things were ! The sea dragged and ground at the shingle as usual ; the west wind swept in over the hamlet ; the little huts at Flata lay there so defenceless, holding their own as best they could. That's how things were. Aye, there was no way out of it.

Per was away at this time at the herring-fishing. But Peter Norset came down over the field one day with a wallet on his back. Peter often took a trip down this way. He swept off his hat as he came in, and bade them good day, and said he brought them greetings from Anna.

Then he sat down by the door and took out his pipe. He was still the well-informed man, who could tell folks all about the new government, the King, and the Storthing. He no longer took a paper, but he picked up his news on the roads as he went about. He told them too about the new church they were building in the next parish, and how, to his mind, they were putting it quite in the wrong place.

Mother Lisbet said something about having thought of making a trip up the dale to look in on Anna, but Peter sniffed and hummed and hawed. She knew they still only had the kitchen loft to sleep in ; and to ask for a night's lodging for her at the farm was more than he cared to do. " Oh, good heavens ! " sighed Mother Lisbet, " and they call themselves brothers ! "

Peter always went off with his wallet full of all sorts of eatables, from bannock to fish, and he accepted all this now, without seeming to feel at all ashamed. The

smoke from his pipe perfumed the whole room, so that there was no doubt he was still smoking the same fine tobacco as of old. And, bless us ! how he cleared the table all round him at meals ! But no doubt a man did get a big appetite tramping such long distances.

Christmas drew near. They had a pig on the little homestead, and it would not have been amiss to be able to keep half of it for themselves ; you get so tired of fish, salt and fresh, fresh and salt, one week after another. But, if they were to keep the bailiff out of the house, the whole beast would have to be sent to town this year too.

However, there was some blood for sausages, and some liver and lights and tallow fat that wouldn't be sold. And in these latter days Mother Lisbet couldn't have anything good in the house without putting aside part of it for Anna.

And now, whatever they might say up on the big farm, she was determined to take a trip up there to see her daughter ; they surely couldn't refuse her a roof over her head, now, in the wintertime.

So there she stood one day, this old woman, with a bundle on her back, and a can of black puddings in her hand ; and little Martin with her in a new suit of clothes, carrying a basket of bannocks and butter.

She wrapped her face in her good woollen kerchief, and set off. It was a snowless winter day, with a clear frosty sky and a bitter east wind that cut and stung through their clothes. Paal went a bit of the way with them, to help with their load ; but he didn't like to go too far from the house. For there was someone left behind in the room, spinning and spinning, with fits of weeping in between. When Lisbet was left alone with

the boy she began to feel that the load she carried would weigh heavy before the twenty miles were covered, so she found herself a stake from a fence to use as a staff.

When an old woman trudges like this along a country road, she has plenty of time to ponder, and many things she has not quite understood before grow clear to her. The heaviest load is not the one you carry on your back, for you can always sit down and rest, and, sooner or later, you're sure to reach your journey's end. It is worse with the load on your mind, especially when a part of it is your own fault. Resting doesn't help with it, and you may never reach that journey's end. But what you have on your back you may feel as a blessing sent by Another by means of you, for sometimes He uses even a sinner for such an errand. And to-day it seemed to Mother Lisbet that, in spite of everything, it was Christmas itself that she carried on her back, and she was sent to carry it to one who else, perhaps, would have no Christmas at all.

The boy trotted by her side, changing the basket from one arm to the other. He chatted away and looked up at his mother, but he couldn't see anything but a big nose and a chin ; all the rest was woollen shawl and bundle. "Suppose we got a lift from someone," said he. "Maybe someone from the dale may be down with barrels to-day, and they'll be going back again."

The old woman thought the same. It wouldn't be out of the way if they did get a lift from someone driving home with an empty cart.

The lake boiled black, lashed by the east wind ; on the wooded ridges the trees were dark and bare, the

farms lay shivering on the yellow-brown hillsides. They came up to the bridge ; and here Mother Lisbet sat down to rest for the first time. If one could only afford to go into the store, now, and get oneself a cup of coffee ; but all her riches were the mite she had scraped together from the sale of her eggs, to bring with her for Anna. She couldn't break into that. Soon she got up again, a little unsteady the first few steps, for the burden was far from light ; but the stake was a good help. Their way led on uphill into the inland parish, the hard road ringing under their feet. Now Mother Lisbet was thinking of Gjert. He had left the hotel and had gone from the city ; there had been no news from himself, but Per heard this when he was last in the city. Poor Gjert, surely something quite out of the way must have happened to him—and not a word to his mother ! What sin had she committed that her children should have such ill-fortune ? Anyhow, all this was a heavy burden—much heavier than the one on her back ; and now she was getting old, and soon would be able to bear no more.

They began to meet cart-loads of barrels coming along from up the dale ; Mother Lisbet gave the men a good meeting, and they said the same ; they sat on the loads and hadn't even to walk, to say nothing of carrying a burden.

Wasn't it strange, how different one person's lot is from another's ? When these carts returned to-day, they might catch up to her, and then perhaps the drivers would ask her to have a lift, though she dared not depend upon that. At any rate, it was safer not to slacken speed.

"Mother," said the boy, "don't you think we'll be

asked in somewhere?" He went close to her side as he said this, and looked eagerly up into her face. "Aye, the Lord grant we may be, but we're only from a cotter's croft you see, child."

Was it so bad to belong to a cotter's croft? And wasn't Mother just as good as all the others? He didn't understand it. He was on the point of saying that if she went up to one of the farms and said, "Thanks for last time,"¹ perhaps they would be asked in, and offered coffee and food. But Mother might laugh at him, so it was perhaps best not to say it.

They went on and on, and Martin would not say how heavy the basket was getting, and Mother Lisbet was silent about the burden that weighed upon her back. Perhaps there was something wrong with her shoes; for it got harder and harder for her to get her feet along. They came to Nustad; two farms together close by the road; and here Mother Lisbet sat down on a barn-bridge. Here people would surely see them; and sure enough there came Maette Nustad on an errand to the storehouse. She looked over at the travellers, and Lisbet got up and said, "Good day." Maette stopped and returned the greeting, a little curious to see if this was someone she knew: then she went on again to the storehouse.

"Why didn't you say, 'Thanks for last time'?" complained the boy. "I have nothing to give thanks for, child," said Mother Lisbet. "I have never been inside Nustad. They are grand folk there, you see."

If only Gjert had been here now, he would have hired a horse and trap for his mother. But the Lord

¹ "Take for sidst," a usual greeting in Norway when meeting friends after receiving their hospitality or spending time together.

knows where he was, and perhaps she would never even see him again.

Now the dale began, and the two plodded on and on. The boy changed his basket from one arm to the other oftener and oftener, and Mother Lisbet leaned more heavily on her staff. But at last someone did come driving from behind them, going at a trot. When Mother Lisbet saw that it was Ola Norset, she stopped and smiled a recognition, and said, "Good day. . Why, I believe it's——" She got no farther, for Ola looked at her as if he had never seen her before, and drove past, still at a trot.

After all is said and done, she would never have expected this. People were strange, to be sure.

They rested again by the waterfall, and ate a little of their food. Several men in empty carts drove past up the dale; but what good would it have been for these two to speak to them?

The boy trudged on again by his mother's side; he could see that she was beginning to flag, and he made up his mind not to change the basket too often, so that, at any rate, she might believe that he was all right. Now it began to get dark, and the farms they passed had lighted windows. Oh—if they were only high enough up in the world to go in as these people's equal, and sit down and be treated to food and drink. Mother Lisbet thought, as she walked by, just how it would be. The mistress of the house would say, "Oh, how glad I am to see you—you must come and sit down by the fire!" Then she would go out and put on the kettle, while the daughters laid the table with a cloth. And they would serve out bannocks and syrup cake, and old cheese and butter and cup after

cup of warm, strong coffee. And how the mistress would ask after all her family ! Then the man himself would come in, and he would say there is no sense in going on afoot with such a heavy load : " Go and put in a horse and drive her," he would command the farm boy. Oh, aye ! If it were only as easy as all that ! But poor folk are poor folk, and she must comfort herself with the thought that to-day she was on an errand, carrying Christmas on her back.

But now she began to feel a real gnawing, a gnawing beneath her chest. She had a few sweet biscuits with her for Anna ; and now there was no doubt about it that the boy was hungry, for when he was he always got that little hacking cough. But Anna would need every bit of the little they had with them. And one mustn't break in on Christmasing beforehand.

At last she reckoned that she had only three resting-places left. If she walked as far as Skau before sitting down again, then she would only have the last six miles to go. The boy, poor fellow, trotted at her side and hitched up the basket every now and again, but it was so dark that she couldn't see whether he sweated or not. Now she no longer looked as far ahead as Norset, but only to Skau, where she could sit down again, and prop her back against something.

It is when you are going along weary and spent that your eyes are really opened to your sins. They gather overhead like dark clouds ; they squawk about you like crows and magpies. You feel so defenceless, as they crowd around closer and closer in the darkness ; and then begin to witness and witness against you. Who says it isn't hard to bear ? . . . At last Mother Lisbet was resting at Skau. All the windows in the

house were lit up, and she sat with her back propped against the byre wall. But what help was in that, when she knew it was she who didn't hook the door fast on holy-day nights last summer? Martha, Martha, you have to suffer for it—you! And what kind of a mother have you, that couldn't take care of you better than that?

· And you, Gjert, who have gone straying now so far into the world—perhaps you will have to pay because I conceived you in sin. If I could only pray you to forgive me, for Christ's sake.

“Mother—we must go on now!”

“Aye, aye—help me up, little boy.”

Those last miles were none too easy. It began to snow; there would be Christmas sleighing, and that would be great for the young folk. But these two with the loads had a long stretch of swamps before them. Well, they too would come to an end some time, and then they would be at Baarset, where the road went through the farmyard. When they got there at last, Lisbet sank down on the storehouse steps, leaned her back against a step, and shut her eyes.

“Mother!” cried the boy. “Are you sick?”

“No, no—but let me be a moment.”

The boy was worn out; he sat close beside her and rested his head against her knees, and then he, too, closed his eyes. But the snowflakes stung his face, and he started up again.

“Mother, you mustn’t sit still any longer; do you hear?”

“Be quiet now; we’ll soon be there.”

“No, we’ve still a long way. Mother, you mustn’t go to sleep.”

The snow fell thicker and faster. She really was nodding off as she sat there ; for a moment all things grew light and warm about her. But she knew that such dreams were dangerous—she must not give way. . . . Get up now—for God's sake don't give way.

Then a man with a lantern came across the yard on his way to the stable. He saw something over on the storehouse steps, went across and held up his lantern. Was it a beggar-woman with a bundle, and a little imp of a boy, and were they meaning to sneak into the hay-loft for the night ? He came up and shook the woman, and the boy was frightened, thinking he meant to strike her.

"Are you sitting there sleeping, woman ?" the man asked. "Where are you going ?"

The old lady struggled to her feet. "Oh ! I'm sorry. I only sat down here to rest a minute. I'm going up to—I'm going a little farther up the dale."

Then they made their way slowly onward.

That same evening Anna sat in the kitchen loft tending her youngest child by the light of a tallow candle. All at once she heard a lot of talking down in the kitchen. Was it Peter come home ? There were steps on the stairs—no, it wasn't Peter. The door opened, and there stood Mother all covered with snow ; a bundle on her back, and a can in her hand ; and behind her the boy Martin, with a basket that was grey with snow too.

"If I don't believe——!" cried Anna.

"Good evening," whispered Mother Lisbet, and stood leaning back against the door.

They were to have started home again a few days

after, but Mother Lisbet was terribly stiff all over, and the old lady at Norset was very kind. She said she would get a man to give Mother Lisbet a lift down, but first and foremost she must have a good long rest.

So it was settled that they should let Martin set off without her, for Father couldn't possibly drag home the Christmas peat without some help. And for Martin it was good fun to tackle the dale all alone, for now he had nothing to carry but an alp-horn that he had got from the goatherd in a swap. The horn was longer than the boy, but he carried it over his shoulder like a rifle : and now and again galloped down the hills, for it is strange how much that shortens the distances between the mileposts. But twenty miles were twenty miles, and at Christmas time the dark falls early.

Toward twilight Johannes Foss was busy shovelling clear a pathway across the yard, after the last fall of snow, when a little fellow with a horn on his shoulder stopped and looked across at him. The boy went on a few steps and seemed to hesitate, but then pulled himself together and came over to Johannes, and thanked him for their last meeting. "Thanks yourself!" said Johannes in surprise. "And who may you be?"

"Oh, I'm from Flata!" said the little boy.

"Flata! That's away down by the fjord, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is so," answered the lad, putting one foot forward, and looking about him at the weather, the way grown people do.

"Well, you'll have to hurry before it gets dark," said the other, and went on with his shovelling. The boy agreed with him—he was quite right. There was

XIV

It was springtime again, and at Flata they were busy in the field ; the four of them dragging at the harrow, each on a rope : Mother Lisbet and Martha in the middle, and the two men one at each side. They pulled hard, putting their backs into the work ; and though the east wind was cold, they sweated all the same, for a big stone was laid on top of the harrow so that it should bite more deeply into the soil.

As they stood still to take breath a moment Martha cried out, " Oh ! just look over there ! "

She gazed up toward the village, and the others did the same. At Inderberg, under the grey headland, there was a man high up on a ladder, hard at work painting the house-wall yellow.

" Well, I never did ! " said Mother Lisbet. " The devil ! " swore Paal. They forgot to take hold again. The little house over there had lain grey and shabby like all the other dwellings along the beach ; and now it was as though it were parting company with them, you might almost say rising in the world to be a farm, while its comrades were left behind, grey and shabby as before.

" Well, think of that ! " And Per stared hard. He was thinking of the youngest daughter there, Bergitta. Her brothers had thrown him down from the loft one night, because he was not good enough for them ; he was only from Flata. And now she would be even higher above him than before.

"Bless the work," came a voice behind them. It was old Setermyr coming along, with a south-wester on his head and a string of fish over his shoulder, an old man with long light hair and beard and eyebrows that stood out like bristles. He lived in a little hut up in the foothills, but he kept a small boat on the beach, and nobody could beat him at fjord-fishing.

"Thanks," they said, but without paying much attention to him, for they couldn't take their eyes off that house under the point.

"Things are going ahead with the folk over there!" said Setermyr, drawing down his heavy eyebrows; "and it's a queer thing—when Poverty flies out of doors she seldom comes back again."

"Aye!" sighed Paal at last, resting his weight on one leg; "and it's not long since times weren't so easy for Anders either. He didn't dare show himself at church because of his debts."

They stood and talked about this: it was a strange thing how luck came to some people. Old Anders Inderberg had rowed and rowed till he owned both a big boat for Lofoten and three smaller boats, and a boat-house for the lot, and a full set of gear for each of his three sons. And at Lofoten they got fish, when everyone else went back empty. "And the old man takes in many a good penny with his small fish-lines at home," added Martha. But at that Paal clenched his teeth, for he knew this was a little dig at himself.

Then Setermyr set off with his fish on his back, up toward home in the hills, and the others yoked themselves on the harrow again, but somehow it seemed to have grown heavier than before.

"They'll get a horse there one day, you'll see,"

panted Martha the next time they stopped. And she thought about the daughters there. They quite often had visits from men on holy-day evenings, but did they get into any trouble? And she who wanted to try it only once or twice, to see how it was—for her things went the way they did.

Every time they stopped to take breath there was always something said about the people at Inderberg. Mother Lisbet happened to mention that the women-folk there did a lot of work on Sundays, so it was not strange that they got on; and Paal remembered that Anders filched a bailer from him when they were out fishing one day. Then it was Per—he had actually seen the men set their nets on Ascension Day. And here they four had to go on dragging at a harrow; and though they had prayers every evening, the grey huts were never a whit the better for that. And Per, who was such a stout fellow, had to put up with the half of what his companions earned at fishing, because he had neither boat nor gear. No wonder the harrow got more heavy to drag. Well, here they were, all together in their poverty; and their only resource was to console one another. Mother Lisbet said that, in the eyes of men, many things may seem strange, but one must remember that earthly glory passes away. The next time they stopped, it was Martha who reminded them that the rich man had plenty of all good things here on earth, but afterward came the day of reckoning for him too. Then they dragged on again, feeling a little better. Temptations may go hand in hand with too much prosperity—that was what they talked about next time they stopped; and they kept looking all the time toward Inderberg. It

was not at all certain that the people over there would be able to stand so much all at once. Anyway, so far, they hadn't turned any more to the Lord for having the luck with them ; if anything it had been the other way. When next they stopped to take breath Paal looked over to Inderberg, and remembered a hymn :

With sinning it came,
With sorrow it goes,
As the chaff is scattered.

They started to pull again, and now the harrow really had grown lighter. There began to be something ugly about that building over there which was so set on being yellow. It grew to be more and more of a consolation that things were not so bad as that yet at Flata. They were not far from feeling that this house-painting had come on the people at Inderberg as a punishment for their sins. And more and more it came to feel like a blessing on Flata that the houses were as they were.

Nevertheless Lisbet let slip a word unawares which she should not have said just at this moment. "Suppose you were to try and put out a line for small fish —you, too, Paal ! " she said.

The old man's face grew grey, and it seemed as if he would strike her. It was the old story over again—he was to hit upon ways of earning money ! " You go out to sea yourself," he growled ; " then we'll have brand-new houses to-morrow for sure ! "

And if his feet had not moved briskly under him before, they certainly went quickly now when they started again. One thing he could and would show

them—that it wasn't that he was lazy. And he wouldn't so much as glance at the yellow building any more. The devil fly away with it. It stood there crowing out over the hamlet : It's no use trusting only on the Lord and the Lofoten fishing : you must be about, you too, after the pennies ; for they mount up to pounds in the end. And you, Paal Flata, you've been a fool and an oaf all your days.

Per pulled in silence. He agreed with his mother, and it hurt him that his own father should have so much less push than other folks. They all had to smart for it, but he most of all, for it fell to him now to set things right.

Inside the house Martin was busy rocking Martha's little girl. This may be fun for a reasonable time, but there ought to be an end to everything. At first he sat there looking at the little round, red face with the blue lace cap about it, and rocked with his hands, and sang all the cradle-songs that he had learned from his mother. He felt that there was something solemn about such a little, sleeping child. Behind the closed eyelids there might perhaps be starry skies ; it seemed not impossible that little Astrid might even now be with God and the angels. But at last he grew tired. He reckoned out how long he had been sitting there, and how long the child had been asleep. And the mother had never even thought of coming in to look at her child ! He rested his hands, and shoved with his knees ; for a time this went quite well, but it made the cradle jerk and heave. Perhaps it would be better if he lay down flat on the floor and rocked it with one foot ? He wasn't so certain any more that Astrid was with the angels. At any rate, she ought really to wake

up some time, so that he could call in her mother, and get away himself.

But the clock ticked on and struck the hours, and the child would not waken ; and the mother seemed not to remember that he was no more than human after all. The fact was, this was a monster of a child, and, right or wrong, he jumped up and began to shake her. Then, of course, the child opened her eyes, and set up a howl, and Martin rushed out and cried to the grown-ups in the corn-field : “ Astrid’s crying fearfully ! ”—and no one, certainly, could deny that it was true.

Then Martha came down from the field. This young girl who had grown plump and pink again didn’t always remember that she was a mother.

At the dinner-table that day Per said, “ To-night we’ll set out a line, Father.” It wasn’t a question : it was a direction.

The father tightened his lips, and looked up—first at Per, then at the others. This was something new. Should he bring his fist down on the table—or should he give in ? The womenfolk looked at him, and he went on with his soup and herrings. “ I’ll see to the lines, Father ; but you must go and get the worms for bait.”

Never before had the boy spoken with such authority. The father looked at him sideways, and then lowcared his head. It was as if he might let himself in for a beating if he gave any trouble. Per was bigger and stronger than his father now.

“ All right ! ” he said at last. And now the thing was settled. He was master in his house no longer.

Down there on the beach lay their little fishing-boat,

all alone ; worn by wind and weather ; defenceless against the long winters—for there was no boat-house to shelter her. Here came the father and son, with the line coiled in a line-box ; for a moment or two they stood one on each side, running her over with their eyes. She ought to have been tarred. Aye, aye, it was the father's way to say that this or that should have been done—only it never went any farther than that.

"I think we'll set the lines out on the shoal," said Per, in a voice that showed the thing was settled. "We may as well," agreed the father, looking over the fjord. As soon as the boat was afloat the old man got in forward and took the oars. He had become the ship-boy now, who had to obey—and it had come about so suddenly. They had changed places in the boat, these two. Per sat in the stern in command. He looked at his father, rowing and rowing, perhaps not sorry to be free of all responsibility. But he thought his father had grown more bent than ever.

When they came to the shoal, Per stood up and flung the line overboard, and it was as if he gave a curse for each hook he threw out. Now he was taking up the battle in earnest. For a moment he looked back on the hamlet—then toward the yellow house at Inderberg. There was a girl there that he was too low to reach, but the devil was in it if he couldn't pull himself up to her and the others. Just wait, Bergitta ; one fine day things'll look better at Flata too.

That night Mother Lisbet lay awake a great deal, and folded her hands without praying. For at times her thoughts grew so strange that she dared not let them free. Was it just—the way things go ? Gjert—

where was Gjert? And now this yellow house? And then all the wretchedness here? They were the same thoughts she had had when she stood with her hand on the cow's back that time they had to sell her. Could it be that over the lowly the Lord pours all the world's adversity; while over the proud He scatters His mercies without end?—No, the thoughts had no power on her; she only lay there with folded hands and looked at them.

Early in the grey dawn Per stood outside the window and knocked for his father. "We must be off and take in the line!" cried he. And the old man got up, and followed obediently.

They came ashore with two large strings of fish. Per put on his Sunday clothes, and went off to the parsonage with one lot; and when he came back he had a shining shilling to show for his trouble.

The mother nodded. She thought of all the old man might have earned through the long years.

But as they sat over the fresh fish at dinner-time, Martin chanced to look out of the window. "Here comes Peter Norset!" he cried.

In stepped the big, dark-bearded man, with the wallet on his back. He shook hands all round, sat down by the door, and placed his hat by his side. Anna was all right, and everything had gone well with the third child; but sad things had happened at Norset. His mother had died the other day. It was very sudden. He sniffed, and looked straight ahead of him. Aye, it was strange how quickly death might come.

The others sat for a while and took in this news. After a while Peter told them that he thought now he

and Anna would soon have to move out of the kitchen loft.

They raised their heads and looked at him. "What's that you say?" Mother Lisbet broke out. "Then have you built you a house?" The others forgot to eat. They thought they were to hear good news.

No, he hadn't got the houses up yet. But they wouldn't be allowed to stop on the farm any longer, now that the mother was gone. So they had to take any way out they could find. Peter Norset was going round with a list, and people were remarkably kind in subscribing. Up in the dale it didn't amount to much, but even there one here and there put himself down for a little timber, and down in the main parish it had gone better than could be expected. Some of them had even forked out three or four shillings. And now he wondered if they thought it would be any good taking the list round the hamlet. He got up, found the list in his coat pocket, and handed it to Per, who he knew could read writing.

There was dead silence round the table. They tried to eat, but the food stuck; they looked at one another. This son of a rich farmer, who lived all amongst well-to-do folk, and had brothers who owned great woods—he came out here to this poor hamlet to beg for help to build a home. Nobody had ever dreamed of doing such a thing as that, even out here in the hamlet; people were used to manage things so that they at least had a roof over their heads.

Per looked at the list, and remembered how he had once envied Anna, who had made such a rise in the world. Many people had put themselves down on the list—from the priest, who gave five shillings, to Per

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Naust, who, in a crooked pencil scrawl, promised six-pence. Altogether it might be some seventy shillings ; but that was not enough for a house.

" You had better draw up to the table and taste the fish," said Mother Lisbet, clearing a place for him. All at the table had a shamed look on their faces.

" But what about your brothers, then ? " asked Paal, looking at the horn spoon he was eating with.

Peter would not say anything against his brothers. Nils had let him have a hay-barn for a cattle-shed, and had moved it up to the new site for him, and Ola had allowed him to have the milch cow that had been his mother's. One couldn't expect much more ; times were difficult all round.

And, once at the table, he cleared up everything in sight, in his usual fashion. The others finished their meal and got up, but Peter had a great appetite to-day, and one doesn't get fresh fish every day. Afterwards he had coffee, and, when he had finished that, he fished out his crocheted tobacco-pouch, and filled a beautiful new pipe. The room was soon full of smoke so fragrant it might have been a gentleman smoking a cigar.

When he sat down on the chair by the door again, he crossed one leg over the other, sniffed a little, and made himself comfortable. There was some talk, he said, about a new chairman for the parish council ; Lawyer Dannevig was next door to blind and deaf, so people would have to make up their minds to let the parish clerk have a chance. Radical though he might be.

" A Radical ? " asked Mother Lisbet. " Isn't that a Free-thinker ? "

Peter Norsæt couldn't help chuckling. Oh, no ! That was only Conservative chatter. But he felt it wouldn't be any use to go into these things fully in this house, where they had no ideas beyond the Bible and the almanac.

Per was still sitting with the list in his hand. He would have to subscribe what he had been paid for the fish to-day. But he would have liked to tell that politician to his face that it wasn't to be spent on gentry tobacco.

They all looked at the shining shilling as Per handed it over. They felt they were all giving it, for there was no other money in the house. There was a hushed stillness over them all. The old mother looked at the wall ; Paal shook his head and had to go over and look out of the window. He thought of Anna, who used to go about here singing as she worked.

When Peter left, he had his wallet well packed with fish and bannock. They looked after him as he strode up the slopes, on his way to tackle the hamlet. He had on his bridegroom's suit with the two ornamental buttons on the back of the coat. It seemed about time for him to cut them off, for they were a piece of grandeur that people didn't indulge in as a rule.

So Peter went about from one little house to another. It wasn't an easy morsel to get down ; but he was in the ditch, and he didn't pretend to be anything else. Every day he was snubbed by his brothers and the neighbours ; but snubs no longer bit on him ; he went about erect, conscious of his own worth. As far back as he could remember, his mother and his sisters and brothers had been at odds with him because he wasn't cut to their pattern ; and, at last, they

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managed to trick him out of his birthright and thought that they were rid of him. But it wasn't so easy as all that: he belonged at Norset, to this very day, cotter though he might be; and if they thought he was not going to get a roof over his head, they were very much mistaken. But to go around flinging dirt at his own brothers was what he could never think of doing. After all, he was the eldest son of the house, and he must defend his own kin. He had thrown himself away, that was true: and it was a bad business for Anna and the children; but at the same time he, too, had to smart for it. And he took his punishment without complaint.

In each little house he bade them all good day and sat down and talked about this and that; and then brought out his list. Unfortunately, there was nothing else for it.

But from this day forth Paal Flata began to be so vague that he often went to Per and asked him about the most obvious things. "Do you think I ought to go to church to-day?" he might ask on a Sunday morning, looking at his son as if he weren't sure he would be given leave. "Why, who should settle that but you?" the boy might answer, laughing. Quite so—but then the old man would stand a long time wondering whether he should put on a collar, or only the brown silk handkerchief. "What do you think?" He felt so little and discarded that he wasn't equal to making any decision.

Summer again, and daylight all night long. There came a Sunday morning, shining and warm, with church bells ringing. The cattle from all the small crofts had gathered in a long train, winding away up

the glen on their way to the outlying pastures, with a noise of tinkling bells and of shouting from the children that went along with them. And from all the huts came old and young in their Sunday best, moving slowly out toward the old, brown wooden church at Lindegaard. The way was so short that no one need hurry ; and they walked with thoughtful and deliberate steps. Some of them had just tarred their boats, and it was impossible to get their hands clean—that was why they shone a golden yellow in the sun ; but the men themselves were in their new suits and walked sedately.

It was on the way to church that Paal Flata said to his son as they walked side by side, "Aye, aye, Per ; I dare say you think I am a father to be ashamed of ; but you must try and do better than I have." The boy had a queer uneasy feeling ; never before had his father spoken so humbly.

Of late Per had begun to wonder whether it was reasonable they should go on keeping little Martin for nothing. It was true that the boy had no parents living, and that he was the son of the mother's brother. But at Inderberg they would have said at once that it was for the parish to look after him. No doubt the mother and father had never thought about it in this way ; no doubt they had believed they were doing the Lord's own work in taking in a defenceless child. But Per had begun to see that this was the way to beggary. The Inderberg folk would have claimed an allowance for him from the Relief Officer ; and no doubt that was how he must take things if he was ever to get on and be well-to-do. Per said nothing to his parents, for everything was on his shoulders now ; but one day he

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put on his Sunday clothes, and took his way in toward the main parish.

But when he drew near to the Relief Officer's house his steps slowed down. He had an uneasy feeling. He thought of little Martin—it was as if he were going off to sell him—to make merchandise of somebody who belonged to Flata. The boy slept with him, in the same bed; he was like a younger brother. It no longer occurred to anyone at home that Martin was not one of their own. Was he going to say, "Out with the money, or you can take him away!" Up to now Father and Mother had kept the boy out of their kindness. Should he go and spoil all that?

He sighed and sat down on the roadside. If he could get thirty-five shillings a year for the boy, he could save enough in two years to buy himself a proper outfit for Lofoten. Else perhaps he would never get so far. Things weren't easy, to be sure.

But then he got to thinking about Anna. Perhaps it was enough that one of the Flata folks should be living on charity. At any rate, he must think it over a while longer.

And so he got up and turned homeward—a comely young fellow, with a long face and fair, curling hair. If he met a girl he was ready to have a joke with her; but when he was alone again there was much that weighed heavy on him.

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youngsters sing out a little bit, and it was high time that they got used to driving in style. The first man at the red gate! Suppose a grown-up did come out of a house and begin to wave and shout—one mustn't listen to everything that's said—and the whole troop tore on along the road.

Over on the marsh there were people cutting peat. They had eaten their dinner by the pools and were lying on the heather now, resting. All of a sudden there too the place was alive with children running hard toward the red gate, as if it were a matter of life or death. What could it mean? Two or three of the racers were so puffed that they gave up. Little Martin lay down on the side of the road and gasped for breath—but he heard a youngster cry out from the moor, "Here come the Councillors!"

Up again. Off again. Let the babies shriek. For the Councillors meant the District Judge, the Sheriff, and the lawyers coming driving on their way to Court, and if you stand by the red gate and open it for them you get pennies rained on you.

In time there was a whole crowd of breathless little boys standing by the gate, waiting. In the carriages, one or two of the babies were still crying wotse than ever. "Keep quiet, you kids! Be still—or the Sheriff'll come and take you!" And, thinking they were threatened with the bogey-man, the little ones redoubled their shrieks.

Along the road at a smart pace there came a file of post-carriages; it was the Councillors—of course it was. First the grey-bearded Judge in a cariole; then, in another cariole, the Sheriff in his uniform hat; then the lawyers and the clerks, in two gigs. They talked

Ola Trön and Martin were fighting tooth and nail over the penny flung by the Judge. Before they knew it the two had got to the edge of the road, and all of a sudden they went head over heels into the deep muddy ditch.

They were pulled out again, black in the face, and they stood there dripping all over, rubbing their cheeks, gasping for air, and blowing the dirt out of their nostrils. The other children shrieked with joy, while the two boys raged and wept, for the penny had stayed behind and the ditch was wide and deep with mud. Martin felt very small as he pulled his carriage back home again. There was no longer any style about this drive, and little Astrid had sense enough already to know that she shouldn't make it worse for him. The distances between the carriages widened ; one went along looking at his money ; another had no money to look at ; and in this way the children straggled home.

By this time the grown-up folks would have finished their nap, so Martin would have to give account of himself when he got home. He took no notice now of any other boys that were about. Every now and again he stopped to wipe his clothes and his face, but he couldn't get rid of all the dirt. There were so many at Flata who took it on themselves to keep him in order ; not only Father and Mother, but Martha and Per too—and they were far more strict, scolding and cuffing him for the least little thing. But just let them wait till he was big !

When they turned off the highroad, he looked down, and the houses at Flata looked to him so dark and threatening. He stopped, and went down on his knees beside the carriage, and began to wheedle little Astrid. " You little pet," he said ; " would you like to have

those two bright buttons of mine? You can, if you like, after all."

"Oh! Can I have them?" Her face lighted up, and she began to kick about in her excitement.

"But you mustn't tell them that I drove you so quickly—you mustn't tell Mother, either."

"Tell?" The little red, round face with the dark eyebrows grew very thoughtful. It was the first time these two had shared a secret. She wasn't three years old yet, but she had had a whipping, and she had seen Martin get his ears boxed. So she nodded wisely. Of course she would hold her tongue.

The grown-ups were sitting around the table over their coffee when little Astrid toddled in. "Mother!" she called, and her little face beamed as she went right up to Mother Lisbet—for she called her own mother "Martha" as the others did. "Mother, we—we didn't drive fast—and I mustn't say——"

"Well, well! So you didn't drive fast, child? Well, Martin is a good boy to pull you along like any other little princess. Here's a piece of sugar for you."

"But—but, I mustn't say anything about it," stammered the child, putting her finger in her mouth.

Now the others began to laugh. "Oh—you weren't to say anything about it? But where is Martin?"

"He has a pain—a pain in his tummy," and she hid her head in Mother Lisbet's skirt. For, of course, she wasn't to know that Martin had gone and sat down against the outhouse wall to dry himself in the sun and wind.

Now comes round the haymaking time on the manor, and all the forty cotters meet, with scythes on their shoulders, at five o'clock in the morning. It is broad day already, with a light heat-haze over the wide grasslands. Red-bearded Ola, the overseer, with the long legs and the short body, leads off, cutting the first swath with the scythe. The others stand and wait their turn. Everything goes in due order ; the eldest cotters must have first go. Now the overseer is a dozen feet ahead ; the haymaking is begun ; the first grass lies flat behind him. Then comes Setermyr, with the long, light hair and beard and the bushy eyebrows ; then Öven Skaret with the red tuft under his chin, followed by Nils Hylla—all three of them are old-timers who have often and often done their turn in the fields of Lindegaard. Then come the others, and Per Flata is among the youngest and last. They race against each other here just as they do in the boats rowing to the fishing—a man must show that he's got some grit. Sometimes it isn't so easy to keep up with the man in front—but it's worse if the man behind calls out that you must get out of his way. The meadow is broad and long, but forty men at work, each leaving a swath behind him, soon make an impression—before long there is a wide stretch of mown grass spread behind them. Now they are all in their shirt-sleeves ; their heads are bare, and the light shines on bald heads, black heads, red heads, flaxen heads. On such a morning the heavens can be so blue and smiling ; every little cloud is full of summer, and lies mirrored in lake and fjord ; sea-birds sit on the shingle, taking it all in, and up in the bright air the lark trills her own song. The leaf-woods that streak

down from the ridges are still wet with dew, and shine in the red sunlight. Now and then a mower stops, wipes his scythe with a wisp of grass, and takes the whetstone from the stocking dangling at his back. The song of whetstone on blade rings out in the shining morning air ; at first only one, then a number together ; and there comes an answer perhaps from a mower sharpening his scythe on a neighbouring farm. So great is the stillness that all sounds can be heard from far around, and the ringing goes up all over the parish like a song of the hay harvest.

This is a great time for the little boys. Every day they have to go up to the manor with a hot dinner for the workers, and, if it is good weather for carrying, the thing is to get away early so that they can have a ride on the horses when they go to be tethered. Martin stands in the kitchen and frets ! "Do hurry up with the soup, Mother ; the others are going !" Soon after, he is hurrying bareheaded and barefooted along the road, with a basket in one hand and a soup pail in the other—quick, quick, for is he not a little behind the others ? But it won't do to run either, for he'd be sure to spill the soup.

All about the manor there is the smell of fresh-cut grass spread on the ground, and of new hay already brought in, fermenting inside the barns. Wisps of spilt hay lie round the yard and up the barn-bridges. There is the rumble of heavy loads in between the out-houses ; the carts make a big circuit to get way enough on them to take them up the long, steep bridges. When they get inside the barns, the hay is tumbled off to left and right, and the empty carts go off through another entry. Then the dinner-bell

chimes from a tower, and the dog, King, lies down on the sward and paws at his ears and whines, the noise goes through his head so. Out in the wide fields men and women sling seythes and rakes over their shoulders, and crowd up to the farm, and maybe a boy takes a girl and rolls her over in the hay as they come along. It is haymaking time ! The air is so strong and warm ; their faces are sunburnt, their bodies smell of sweat and grass. Now they settle down all over the barn-bridges, and food-baskets and cans find their way to their rightful owners. "What have you brought to-day, Martin ?" asks Per Flata, taking the cover from the basket. "Haddock ! Good for Mother ! And here's butter for the fish, too ! U-ni ! And milk soup !" Per drinks the soup from the can, and sighs with content. All about him the talk is in full swing, and there's a scent of hay about the jokes and the laughter. The fellow who isn't in wedding settle on a day like this isn't worth his salt. There are men and girls who have slept in the barn here last night, and there are lots of remarks to be made about that. Laughter rings in the air from fifty throats.

But the boys who brought the food stand each by his haymaker, keeping a close watch upon him. There's bound to be something left over. It's well understood that on the way home there's to be a feast at the red gate off the leavings. God help the man who eats up everything. That, however, isn't likely to happen, for the men have been boys themselves in their time and come with the food-baskets, and the custom then was the same that it is now. They'll remember right enough.

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At last the meal is over, and the little bare feet scamper back toward the hamlet.

The urchins say very little on their way down through the birch wood, but in the meadow by the red gate they stop, and here they settle down and go to work on the leavings. They fancy themselves all sorts of wonderful things ; a big gipsy gang just about to fall on each other with their knives, when the beadle pounces down on them—a band of Red Indians in a forest—warriors on the war-path. “Lend me a potato, Ola ?” cries one boy to another. “Yes, if I can have a drop of your soup.” The bargain is struck, but others cannot come to terms, and they pelt one another with herring-bones. Potato-skins make a splendid ball to hurl in the face of the enemy—and the boys finish up with a fight in which baskets and pails are freely used.

It was here by the red gate that Ola Trön came over to Martin one day, and said that he wanted to speak to him.

“What do you want with me ?” asked the other severely ; for since they’d gone head first into the ditch together they had not been great friends.

“Stay behind when the others go,” whispered Ola in his ear.

This gave them a strange feeling. If they were going to have a regular making up, it would seem almost too grown-up a business. But when the others picked up their things and went, both of them stayed behind.

“What d’you want with me ?” asked Martin, and his freckled face was as fierce as ever.

"I want to help you find that penny," said the other.

"In a ditch full of muddy water? You cuddy!"

"Let's try to bale it out."

They went over to the edge of the ditch, and stood there considering. Measuring the job with their eye, they concluded it was a good thing there were two of them; together they might, perhaps, put it through.

"We could bale it out with the pails," said Ola, scratching his fair head.

They went to work, each with a pail, and they baled and baled and baled. They poured the mud out on to the road, and searched every morsel of it. It took time, but they stuck to their task. They soon had a big heap of mud on the road; there was no end to the thing. Suppose the Sheriff came? The sun sank down toward the western mountains, but the two boys kept on working. What would the people think when they didn't come home? At last Ola cried out, "Here it is, Martin!"

It was almost unbelievable—but there it was. They fingered the penny in turn; they washed it till it shone, then they held it up to the light and began to dance about. And now each tried to outdo the other in generosity. "Of course it's yours," said Ola; "you were the first to get hold of it when the Judge threw it down." Martin wasn't going to be mean, either. "No," he said "you shall have it."

But already Ola had a plan. "D'you know that the Bishop's to come on visitation this summer?"

"Is he really?"

"Have you a handkerchief to take with you when you go up for Catechism?"

No, Martin hadn't a handkerchief—it was most unfortunate. Then Ola told him that a handkerchief could be had for twopence at the village store—a red one, with a picture of the King in the middle.

"Oh, my! But I can't get one for a penny."

"But you can make a couple of whisks to sell," said Ola eagerly, "and then we would go to the store together."

Naturally Martin went along humming when he was alone again, for fancy his getting a handkerchief with the King in the middle of it! None the less, his troubles were many. All the other boys were outgrowing him—soon he would be the smallest of the lot. And often he had to stay in bed, coughing and coughing. If he could only get together enough to buy something for little Astrid, too; he knew she was longing for a doll with a porcelain face.

When haymaking time was over the Bishop came; and when the white-haired old man with the gold cross upon his breast walked down the church aisle, past the two rows of children, it was rather difficult for Ola and Martin to remember the Catechism, for they both had such colds in their heads that they were forced to pull out their red handkerchiefs every moment to blow their noses.

XVI

SEVERAL years had passed since Gjert Knutsen had given any sign of life, and at Flata, of late, they very seldom talked about him. He had gone so far off into the unknown—perhaps he wasn't even alive any longer. But Mother Lisbet sighed many a night as she lay in her bed.

Then, one autumn, Per had gone to the city with some herring-barrels, and when they had been delivered he went with his friend into a little tavern by the harbour to get a glass of beer. And there was Gjert Knutsen behind the bar, pulling corks out of bottles and serving the customers.

Per stood stock still and stared ; Gjert too started, and a flush spread over his face. Then he pulled himself together.

" Well, well ! Is it you, Per ? " he said. " Hello, my boy ; and how are you getting on ? And Mother ? "

Per went up to him and shook hands, and, amid the noise and tobacco-smoke round them, the two brothers remained silent a moment, looking at each other.

But could this be Gjert ? The curly golden hair had grown so thin and grey ; the cheeks were hollow and wan ; he was unshaven and collarless, and had only a brown woollen cardigan over his waistcoat. And when he went over to serve drinks at the small tables his legs were so stiff he could hardly put one foot before the other.

Per and his friend seated themselves, and Gjert came over and treated them to a bottle of stout. "Well, Per," he said with a sigh, "is Mother really so poorly?"

"Oh, no!" Per corrected him. "Mother is just the same as usual."

"Aye? Oh, then it was Father—to think he should be so ill, poor man."

Per had said no such thing—he had to correct Gjert again.

"And you are married, Per?" Gjert steadied himself on his crazy legs and looked at his brother.

"Not a bit of it—I'm still a gay young joker."

"Is that really so? Well, well, perhaps you'll be an old bachelor like myself. But I have only just got back——" He looked toward the window and put his hand to his head.

"Aren't you going to come out?" said Per, meaning home to Flata.

"Gracious, yes! I'll be there before you know where you are."

And he stumped back behind the bar on his stiff legs and began serving again.

"We didn't know you'd come back to town," said Per to him across the room—but he felt that it was best not to say too much with so many listening.

"Well, you can't know everything, can you?" answered the brother, with a laugh. Then he looked toward the window again, and grew quite doleful. "Dear me, Per—is Mother really so bad?"

At this Per and his friend couldn't help exchanging glances. What could Gjert mean?

Per had an errand in the city, and, when he got up

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to go, his brother came over and shook him by the hand.

"It was good to see you again, Per. You've grown a big stout fellow—a beard to your chin, and such broad shoulders! Aye, aye! But come and see me in the morning. We don't open till nine, so if you're along early we could have a little while together."

The next morning Per was up in good time, but he found the tavern closed, and he had to go around the corner and in the back way, through an alley and across a yard. In a little room with empty bottles standing about the floor he found his brother, not yet out of bed. The smell of beer and back-yard refuse almost turned Per sick. Gjert raised himself on his elbow and lay there hawking and coughing, and trying to rouse himself. "Is that you, Per? Whew! I've such a cursed sore throat to-day. Can you reach over that bottle from the window? There's a glass beside it, isn't there?" Per poured him out a dram, and Gjert made a face as he swallowed it; but after that he had to have a half-bottle of beer brought to him, and he put it to his mouth and emptied it. "Puh! Take a dram yourself, Per. Oh, well—that'll come soon enough. At your age I didn't like it either. It is beastly!"

He crawled out from the bedclothes, and stood there on his thin legs washing himself. When he was brushing his hair he sighed deeply. "Oh, dear, to think that Mother is so low, poor thing!"

"No, no! We are all quite well," said Per, not knowing what to think. His brother was certainly queer.

"Ah, that's good! And what did you say was the

name of the girl you married? Is she from the village too?"

"I'm not married," the other assured him, almost vexed.

"Oh—so you're not, eh? Well, I think you're quite right—women are no good. But now tell me about the others home at Flata. Father—and Martha, and Anna, and little Martin—and the neighbours. Is anyone dead?"

Per had no mind to say anything about his two sisters, and he did not get very far in telling about the others, either, for he soon saw that his brother scarcely heard a word. Gjert sat down on the bed, thrust his hands under his braces, and sighed. Then he looked round and tried to smile. "Well, I dare say it strikes you that I'm not just living like a prince. The thing is, you see, that I've grown prudent these days. I'm out to save now. In the old days—aye, then indeed! Then it was nothing but fooling and racketing late and early. But one fine day you grow older, and you come to see that you must lay up something for your old age. And then one grows miserly, and thinks of nothing but saving up the pence. I do hope you understand that that's the reason!"

"Where have you been all this long time?" asked Per, going straight to the point.

"Been!" Gjert put his hand to his forehead, and drew down his brows. "Been, well—hm! Oh, aye—I *have* knocked about a bit, perhaps—aye." He sighed again and looked at the wall. "Hm!"

"Did you get as far as America?"

"I've been a little farther than that, maybe. There's a need for waiters everywhere, you see. Aye, aye."

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"You went to Hamburg first, didn't you?" Per had to get it out of his brother bit by bit.

"Aye—oh, yes, it was a Hamburg steamer. Yes—that's right." And he sighed again.

"But why did you leave the hotel here?"

Gjert gave a little start and tried to laugh. "Aye, tell me that—why did I do it?"

"We half thought you were going to marry—to marry the widow—the one that owned the place." Per wondered himself how he could go so far.

Gjert became red again.

"Oh, indeed—so you thought that. That would be like Mother. Ah, Mother, Mother! A pity she should be so ill. Poor Mother. Ah, no, you see, the hotel lady, she got a better man. What did you say was your wife's name?"

Per would have liked to shake him. "Come, tell me something about yourself, Gjert. Have you been well?"

"Well? Oh, yes! No, by the way, not always. No, I'm afraid not. Of course you've noticed how bad my legs are—— Uff, aye!"

"Yes—did you break them?"

"Break them—no, not exactly. It was on a big English boat that ran between London and Calcutta. There was a big stack of boxes piled in the 'tween-decks, and they tumbled over on top of me, and my legs came off worst. When we got ashore at last I was in hospital for months. Uff, aye!"

"And have you had yellow fever too?"

Gjert laughed.

"Oh, no! Not *yellow* fever—rheumatic fever. That started when we were right out at sea, and on

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the way to Sydney. And then it was hospital again, and my dollars leaked and leaked away."

"I expect you've been up against other things, too."

Gjert turned to him.

"Oh, aye! Other things as well. Aye, aye. And you see what I'm like now"—and he smiled and laid his hands upon his thighs.

"And you never wrote to Mother?"

"No, that's so. The thing is, there was far too much to write about. And the worst of it is, I haven't been able to send her anything either. I don't know a bit now how it happened." He sighed again. "But there was a time when I thought I could never get far enough away. Aye, aye! That must have been it."

He rose and put on waistcoat and jacket, and he looked a little better than yesterday. But, all the same, this unbrushed and unshaven fellow was hardly the brother Per was used to in old days.

They went out to a little eating-house and had some food and coffee. But Gjert kept on losing himself and asking questions that Per had answered many times before.

Then they went for a walk out by the harbour. Gjert walked with a stick; every step he took seemed to hurt him. There was not much life in the streets yet; now and again a cart rolled past, and on the quay the fishermen were laying out their catch for sale. Presently they met a well-dressed man, who greeted them with a wide sweep of his hat, and a "Good morning, good morning, Gjert"—but he hastened past them and away.

"That was a friend of yours, I suppose," said Per.

"Friend?" echoed the other. "Oh, well, we can call it that."

The two brothers walked slowly side by side; one a thin, threadbare townsmen, on crazy legs; the other a broad, country lad, in waistcoat and south-wester. Gjert stopped and looked out toward the ships in the harbour. "Aye, Per, the world is big," he said. "But one can be so damned lonely in it. You try it! And at last you begin to think that after all there may be one or another at home here to care about you! You're fool enough for that."

"Well, but haven't you a lot of comrades here in town?"

"H'm. Comrades. Aye! Comrades—they are people that borrow your money so long as you have any, and kick you when your pockets are empty. That's what they amount to."

"What about that one we met just now?"

"That man—oh, aye!" Gjert tried to laugh. "He—yes, indeed."

"What about him—can't you tell me?"

"Oh, yes—to be sure! When I left the hotel here I had a good dollop of money; not a fortune, of course, but a few hundreds of pounds maybe. I'd arranged to buy a house and planned to fit up a big restaurant there; so I took the money out of the bank, and hid it for the night in a chest of drawers. Next day I came to get it to pay for the place, and the drawer was broken open and the money gone. That man we met just now—he knew at least where I'd put the money."

"Did you have the fellow arrested?"

"No!" Gjert shook his head.

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"Are you crazy, man? You didn't have him jailed?"

"No, he was a friend, you see."

"But what about justice?" Per stamped with annoyance.

"Pooh!—what good would that do? He, too, wanted to buy a place and start a hotel there. And he did it, too; but he made a mess of it, poor fellow. Now he's a barber again as he was before. That's the way things go with us, Per." And he looked at the ships again, and smiled sadly.

He took a few more steps and stopped again. "No, Per, I should have stayed in the village. If I had, I might have been doing well as a tailor or a shoemaker now. Or I ought to have taken jobs on ships that went even farther away. But then, to be sure, a waiter must have legs that'll carry him; and I'm no good for anything else, unfortunately. That's how things are! Aye, aye, that's how things are, you see!"

"But you were such a big man when you were at the hotel, Gjert. You were such good friends with all the swells here. They called you Fête-Knutsen. Wasn't that so?"

The other laughed. "Really, did they call me Fête-Knutsen? Yes, perhaps so. No doubt that was because I had the arranging of so many big dinners for them. Oh, yes, and when I walked in the streets then many people greeted me from a long way off. Yes, that they did! It is different now. If I want to take a look round town now, I wait till it's night-time; that's when I go out, Per."

"But suppose you were taken ill—is there nobody to look after you?" Per felt as if he were choking.

"Ah, well, it's better not to get ill—that's the best way, my boy."

"But you have your home, Gjert. You have me and Mother, and all of us at Flata. You do know you can come to us—and you're welcome to what we have."

Gjert laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Thanks for that, Per. But I think you have enough folks as it is. Oh, no! There'll be some way out—there's sure to be some way out, you'll see."

Then he turned and stumped slowly back on his feeble legs. The streets were livening up now; the shops were opening; housewives and maids with baskets on their arms were coming down to the quay to buy fish. Per was so used to walking quickly that it was difficult for him to shuffle along at his brother's pace. "I must open my temple, too, Per, now," said Gjert. "So begins a day for me as for the others."

"You said that the hotel lady was married again?"

"Did I say that? Aye, aye. She has sold the whole place, and her husband is just the sort of man she ought to have. He's a gentleman—comes of good people—Bratt is his name—he's a solicitor and a member of the Storthing, and no doubt he'll go further still before long. That's how that is."

"Have you been to see her?" asked Per—and he was surprised at his brother's sudden start.

"What? Been to see Mrs. Bratt? Do you think I look fit to call on her?"

"I see, I see," said Per, and he understood that Gjert would rather talk about something else.

"But you mustn't tell Mother how things are with me, Per. You promise me that?"

"Why, of course!"

"As you make your bed, you must lie upon it, you see. You can't keep on for ever being Fête-Knutsen. Ah, no, you can't. It ends as it must end. And women understand that well enough. Yes, they do indeed."

Per went with him into the tavern. The first person that came in was the drayman, to ask how much he was to deliver to-day. Gjert told him, and the man came with two baskets full of bottles.

"And here's the bill," he said, and dug it up out of a bag.

"Yes, next time, my dear Olsen; next time."

"Oh, no, I must have the money now."

They looked at one another. Then Gjert began to rummage in a drawer. "Take this just for to-day," he said, bending over the counter and lowering his voice.

But the man did not take the money. "Oh, no—I must have the whole! The old chap won't wait any longer."

"But it'll only be waiting till to-morrow, my dear Olsen; I am not running away. To-morrow, you hear?"

"Hm, then I shall have to take back some of the bottles."

"Well, well, Lord bless me! Take them then, man!" And Gjert handed some bottles back over the counter—but there was a deep flush on his face, for Per was standing listening.

"One hasn't always got small change handy," said he, when the drayman had gone.

XVII

It was autumn, with leaf-woods red and yellow on the hillsides, corn-sheaves stacked on their poles, and potato-fields turned black. The rime lay deep on the fields in the morning, but in the middle of the day the sun was still hot. Up on the hillside above the cleft a girl was cutting foliage with a sickle, and tying it up in bundles like corn-sheaves. She had pinned up her blue skirt ; the brown plait of her hair was loosened, and dangled behind her. She hummed as she worked, and once in a while she looked down on the fjord, lying steel-grey, waiting for a breeze. A little fleet of trawlers lay drowsing in the bay, with hanging sails. It was on one of them that Per had shipped as a hand ; but—the question is, would his luck turn this year ? The girl had a finely cut little face, with long eyelashes and a blood-red mouth ; she was slight in build, but quick and eager in all her movements. On her left cheek was a scar that she came by as a little girl when she was playing in the barn and ran into the point of a corn-pole.

All of a sudden she started—there was a sound of feet brushing through the heather. Now the branches were parted and a man appeared, brightening as he sees her. “ What, is it you, Bergitta ? ”

“ Yes, and you come trying to frighten me ! ” She was quick to unpin her skirt and twist the plait up on her neck again.

"I'm out looking for our sheep. Have you seen anything of them?"

"No—the sheep are farther in on the downs, I should think." She took up her sickle again, laughing a little, for he really might have thought of a better excuse.

"Are you alone?" he asked. "Yes, can't you see I am?" She laughed again. He was so silly to-day. Now he sat down in the heather and began to nibble at a twig. Perhaps he was afraid there would be others coming from Inderberg, and that there might be trouble again.

"It's good to be you, Per, that can go off for a walk like a gentleman."

"You don't think I do anything else?"

"Oh yes; yes, of course! You're going out with the trawlers, I hear."

"No, Father will go along to begin with; I have lots of other things to do."

She looked at him, and had her own thoughts, no doubt.

"I wonder if your father could lend me his big boat?" he asked. "I've got to go across the fjord after some timber."

"Well, you'll have to ask *him* about that. Are you going to fetch timber?"

"I meant to, yes!" At last he could get it out; he was going to begin repairing the houses. He looked downward toward his home. Yes, indeed! Nothing less than that! First he was going to put an extension on to the out-house—some five or six yards long and as high as the roof; it was to be a storage place for the hay and straw. It was none too soon. He felt quite bashful as he sat there talking about it! The extension

came to seem almost a present to her. But did she care anything about it? But, whether or no, he had to go on talking about the houses, for it was clear that they were what frightened both the girl and her parents, and he thought about them himself all the time. Aye, the house—it lay there like a living creature, sighing to be rescued. It must come down, and, if anything came of the fishing, he must see about a new one. He sat there fairly building it up for her—but did she care about it? He dared not tell her the whole truth: that he would only be able at present to put up the framework of the extension. That he could do this autumn, and perhaps he would get the boarding and the roofing done in the spring. But to tell her all this now would make it seem nothing—and at the best it was not very much. She had begun to cut branches again—perhaps she had not even been listening to him. She was from Inderberg, where the buildings were newly painted, and showed up from afar off.

All the same, she stole little veiled glances at him now and then. No doubt she thought he looked well, sitting there with his peaked cap pushed back from his forehead, and his long weather-beaten face so intent on what he was telling. Poor fellow, it was not his fault that things were as they were at Flata—he really tried his very best. But it was as if nothing would thrive there except psalm-singing and godliness, and you could not get fat on those, her parents said. She had a great mind to throw herself about his neck; but if she did, she would probably stay there, and, to fight down this desire, she kept on cutting and cutting.

“I’m wasting your time, I’m afraid,” said Per,

jumping to his feet. Here he had been sitting confessing to her something that meant the whole world to him ; and she—she seemed not even to have heard him. Perhaps she would laugh behind his back when she had got rid of him. “ Well, I must go and look after the sheep,” he said gruffly, and he started off. “ Good-bye, Bergitta.”

“ Good-bye, Per ! ” she called after him. Dear me, the boy was in a hurry all of a sudden !

He ran on over the hillocks ; the sheep might be all round him, but he had forgotten them long ago. This extension business had suddenly become quite ridiculous ; Bergitta had spoiled the whole thing for him. If only she knew how it felt to have taken up such a burden as the one he was trying to shoulder. If she only knew. Yet, all the same, if she would only come to his side and trust herself to him, he would put it through. But there was little use in sneaking around her like this. There was no use. And yet he was not man enough to stop it. No ! He wasn’t man enough to give it up. Suddenly he stopped short and looked down.

He remembered that last time they had a talk together : she asked him if Martha was going to stay on at home. Yes, she asked that. Of course, she had some reason for asking. Perhaps she thought there was no sense in their going on keeping Martha and the child ; and it was clear the old people at Inderberg had talked about it. There you have it, Per ! Even if you had a house of silver and gold Bergitta would never come to it so long as Martha was there with her bastard child—and Martin, too, had to have food and clothes for nothing. Do you understand now, Per ?

But, then, are you willing to cast your sister out—for what else can she do with herself? And, if you did it, could you sit and sing hymns in the evening afterwards?

He tramped here and there, finding no sheep. Down below, the fjord grew broad and sleek again, and the grey house at Flata lay there huddled and helpless. It's no use, it seemed to say to him; you're a flabby fish; it'll be the same story with you as it was with your father.

And so he went back home again, and when a man's hands were as full as his were now, he couldn't help being a bit short in the temper. He snapped at his father and mother without quite knowing it; and both Martin and little Astrid had their ears boxed a good deal. The little girl howled, and Martha became indignant. Oho! Perhaps it's she that's to rule the roost here now! . . . They quarrelled time after time, and one day the explosion came. "You can take your brat and go off to the parish," said Per, stamping with rage. "This is no stud-farm—now you know it!"

The parents looked hard at him; Martha broke out crying, and the two children escaped from the room.

Martha's lot was not an easy one. From Astrid's father she never received a penny, and yet both she and the child must be clothed, and even if she worked day and night here at home it only meant that they got their food and no more. In the hamlet there was nobody who needed her to work for them, and, if such a thing should happen, it would only bring her a couple of pence a day. She lay far into the night, tortured with the thought that, the moment Per brought home a wife, she and Astrid would have to clear out. And all

the time the child lay by her side chattering about her own affairs: "Shall we ask the Lord to be good to Mother?" "Yes." "And to Father, too?" "Yes." "And to Per?" "Oh, yes, of course!" "And to our Martin?" "Lie still now." "And to the cat?" "Yes, to the cat, too." "But not to the mouse, eh?" "Oh, no, not to the mouse." Then the little chatterbox quieted down, and Martha thought: maybe she could get a place in service somewhere inland—but not if the child was to be with her. And if she had to pay for Astrid to live out, the wages she got would hardly keep them. What was to happen to them? All of a sudden a voice came from down in the bedclothes: "Oh, but He must be good to the mouse, too!"

"Yes, yes," said the mother, with a moan.

But now autumn began in earnest, with storm and rain; and fjord and hamlet lay wrapped in raw, driving mist. The grasslands were cropped bare; and the cattle and sheep had broken loose from their tethers, and wandered in great flocks all over the fields. But in a window there sat a gaffer keeping a look-out for them. Why should the whole lot get together just here? Out he ran with a stick and shooed them off on to his neighbour's land; but there were eyes on the alert there too, and out came the watchers trying to scare off the strange cattle at least. The cows tore at the pasture, but there was only moss left now, with no taste in it; so they galloped off, kicking up their hind legs. There must still be a blade of grass somewhere or other. Sometimes two neighbours would stand one on each side of their boundary and let fly at each other. "Be so good as to look after your cattle, or

I'll take and pound them." " You'd best do the same ; for I've a good mind to slaughter yours, when next they come to my place." " You great ass, you ! " " You wind-bag ! " It was not an easy time for the cattle—fences between the small fields there were none, and the ditches had silted up long since.

At last the west wind had raged itself out, and there came quiet moonlight nights with shining clouds and a still sea. Now and again a dulj roar might be heard from seaward, but Blaaheia took the brunt of the weather, and in here was shelter. In here it seemed as if the world was pausing to take breath before the winter set in. Sea and rocks lay still and waited.

It was on such an evening that Martin and little Astrid sat roasting potato slices on the side of the oven. They had cut off slices of raw potato and had stuck them on to the hot stove. When they were done maybe a little blacking came away with them ; but they tasted good anyway. Then Martin whispered that he had caught a Man in the Moon in a pool out on the point, and she could see it if she would go with him now. " You're telling stories again." " No—just come and I'll show you."

They stole out. " Where are you children going again ? " fretted Martha ; not because she was cross with them—it was only that she worried too much.

" We'll be in again directly," said Martin.

They went padding together down the slope toward the point ; the little girl finding it rather uncanny, and holding on to Martin's hand for safety. She had a kerchief over her head, tied in a knot under her chin just as Mother Lisbet tied hers, and her little skirt reached down to her feet. They stopped to look at

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their own shadows following after them. The sward was bright with dew ; across the fjord lay a narrow path of moonlight, where heavy waves lifted slowly and sank lazily down again. The children looked at the skies and at the moon ; the night was great and wide ; all things lay listening for something that would soon come to pass. "To-night God is out walking," said Martin in a low voice.

"Does He only come out in the moonlight, then?"

"No—when He's angry He comes in storm."

"Uff!—Have you ever seen Him, then?"

"Yes, I saw Him last year."

"Now you're telling stories again."

"Bother! Why can't you ever believe me?"

They came out on to the shiny, slippery point ; the sea washed in on both sides, but it was so gentle to-night ; it only whispered a little with the seaweed and the boulders. "Uff!" she pouted. "I won't go any farther now ; what if the Drow came!" But Martin comforted her by telling her that all the Drows had gone out to sea to search for the winter. Now they were not far from the point ; and there the sea was making a bigger noise, and throwing shining spray up into the air. Out in the middle of the fjord the children saw a steamer with its row of lights, and far out at the fjord-mouth the yellow star of a light-house. But here was the pool, a little sea in itself, caught up in a small gully of the rock. And see now—if it wasn't true! Down there was the moon. Astrid leaned forward and put a finger in her mouth. Yes, there it was! "Poor moon!" she said at last. "Can't he get out again either?"

"Oh, no, he's got to stay there!"

"Yes, but he's in the sky too!" And she looked up aloft.

"That's his brother, that is." She only half believed him, but they both went down on their knees and bent forward over the puddle, and there, down in the water, they saw two faces. There you are, you see! They stared at the two newcomers and made faces at them. Well, now he had shown it to her.

Then they sat down on the rocks a while and looked about them. They tried to talk a little, but soon gave it up. They forgot where they were, and sat there in silence. The fjord and the moon and they two—there was nothing else. The shining night had taken them in to itself; and behind them stretched two shadows across the rocks.

"Astrid and Martin!" called out Martha. She hadn't been able to keep herself in any longer—nothing would serve but she must be at them again.

As they paddled upward toward home, the hamlet lay in a ring of lights around the bay. Strange to see all the western house-walls white in the moonlight, with the little yellow pricks of light in the windows gazing out over the fjord.

The reason Martin had taken Astrid about with him of late to all his plays was that he knew what Per was threatening in his mind. They were in the way here; they made two too many, he and she. And he—he had believed so long that it was nothing but a story when people said he was only a foster son. But now he knew that it was true after all—Mother and Father were not his real parents, and Flata was not his real home. It was strange to think of, and he had to think of it all alone. For if he went to Mother and Father

they could not help him either, however much they wanted to. It was as if he had been cut adrift from them in some way, and this hurt a little. Things wouldn't be much better for little Astrid, too—it wasn't plain sailing for either of them. He would soon be fourteen years old now, but he was smaller than all his mates ; they all had stockings to change into when they got wet, but he had no second pair, so it was no wonder that he often had to lie in bed with a bad cough. But, all the same, if Flata had been his real home he wouldn't have minded going barefoot both winter and summer. What could be the reason that all his mates were so much better off than he and little Astrid ? To be sure, the little thing didn't understand all this yet.

" You're squeezing my hand," she grumbled, trying to pull away from him.

" I'll squeeze you more than that," he said, and kept her little paw tight in his.

But one day, during the spell of good weather, a bow-legged, red-bearded man came down across the fields, walking with short, quick steps, and looking most benevolently at the buildings and at the western sky. His wadmal jacket was tightly buttoned up ; and when he coughed, though there was nobody near, he held his hand to his chest as if he wanted to deaden the sound. From in front his body seemed, perhaps, rather too short for the long arms, but it made up for it by bulging out into something like a hump behind. It could be no other than Helmer Spandet, a man who, by ill-luck, had just become a widower. He was clearing a little holding out in the marshes, and had just put up a house, so it was a most unfortunate time for

him to lose his helpmate. He walked into the Flata house, took off his hat, and droned out "Good day," then sat down by the door and asked how they all were. All the men were out; in the room little Astrid, on a small stool close by her grandmother, was being taught to knit a mitten, and Martha, at her spinning, bent her head now lower over her work. Before very long the talk turned to what had befallen him, and at that he sighed so heavily that he seemed on the verge of tears. Mother Lisbet said that she that had left them had been a good help to him; and he agreed, and went even further in her praise. But no doubt it was the will of Providence—things had been going too well with him, and it was ordained that one day he should stand alone. Doubtless it was so. There was One Who rules these things. Mother Lisbet tried to comfort him a little, saying that if he only took it in the right way everything might yet be well with him again. But he had difficulty in believing this; he saw no ray of light in any direction. Now and then he threw a glance at Martha, and it was as if she felt it and worked harder than ever. But little Astrid sat wondering why it was he didn't notice how clever she was at knitting.

Well . . . he was wondering if there was any possibility of getting Martha to come for a day or two to bake for him. He was all alone at his place, and had to do everything both indoors and out; he had a cow and a pig; but a man had only the two hands, even if he worked both night and day with them. There was silence for a while. The old mother looked at her daughter—the young woman's face had a deeper flush, but she had stopped her wheel and sat gazing

and out, and was almost in tears over not being quite alone any more. But one's thoughts were one's own, and it almost turned her sick to feel him near her.

By now Per had put up the framework of the extension, and it stood there like a skeleton gaping out from the end of the byre. It got no further in the meantime, but people looked at it and began to say that it seemed there would be more grip and grit in the lad Per than there was in his father. The old lady at Inderberg thought the same. She actually made herself errands along the road to where she could see across to Flata. The framework stood there, and clearly showed that the boy meant to change the order of things. When old Anders Inderberg came with a spade on his shoulder and a dipper in his hand, on his way to the beach to find worms for bait, he would stop too, and look up toward Flata. Well, well, if the fellow were really man enough to clear up all the muddle down there. . . . The old man was so worn out now that he crawled about with his knees and his bottom very near the ground, and his head bobbed and bobbed with every step he took ; but he had never been one to lie on a bed of idleness. It was different with the people at Flata ; they thought the Lord would provide the pennies for them, and there was no need for them to do it. He had never reckoned Paal for anything but an old pop-gun of a fellow that wept to-day and raged to-morrow, and muddled everything he had a hand in. But the boy ? Well, well. The womenfolk thought him so good-looking—but that wouldn't keep a wife and children.

Bergitta might be clean crazy about him, but that was just like a young girl, and luckily Anders still had his head above ground. Up till now he had put down his foot—up till now at any rate——

Then one day the old woman from Inderberg took a turn over to Flata. She came along, short and four-square; and she had her knitting fastened at her hip. Anything so smirking as her face was surely never seen, as she stepped inside, gave thanks for their last meeting, and inquired how they all were these days. She asked after all in turn, and, last of all, after Per—you might almost think she was a relation. [There was coffee and talk, and Martha watched the guest closely. When this woman took so much time off on a working day you might be sure she had some tow on her distaff, and it wasn't hard to guess what the web was that she was out to spin. "And you are the one that will have to pay," thought Martha. "Soon now you'll be turned out." She looked at her mother, so flushed in the face, and doing all she could to make much of the visitor. It was as if the old woman had done the house an honour. It was only Per who mattered now. It was curious how one's own mother can come to be such a stranger. "Am I not your daughter, then?" she thought. "Are you quite forgetting me as you sit there?"

A few days after came Bergitta in her Sunday best with a jug in her hand, to borrow some yeast for the Christmas brewing. It was years since she had set foot inside this house, but now the pretty young girl sat down by the door with her jug in her lap, blushing, and ready to laugh at anything in her confusion. Per came in, and she bade him good day.

"Oh, good day!" said he, as if she were a real quality visitor, but he crossed the room and sat down by the table. "Are you out a-walking, Bergitta?" He showed no sign of knowing the meaning of this visit; but his eyes seemed larger and his face shone. Now Paal came in, and again Bergitta gave the usual greeting. He threw ceremony to the winds and asked her if she came to sleep with him to-night.

"Oh, Father!" said Martha. They tried to laugh, but Bergitta looked appealingly at Per. Per looked at his father with no pleasant expression. Aye, aye; the old man felt, as he sat down, that he might have found something better to say; but it was not always so simple when you were trying to make a little joke. There he sat, with his fringe of beard from ear to ear and the cleft in his chin, chewing away, and quite at a loss what to do or say.

The cloth was laid and the table spread with good things. The young woman looked about her; looked at the old man and the old woman and round the room, and no doubt she thought her own thoughts; but she dared not look at Per. And Martha had to do all she could to be pleasant to her. There sat this strange girl who would soon come here and turn her out, and yet she had to laugh and talk and be amiable to her. And there sat her brother, who was such a dear boy in the days when they played together, and now that strange woman was a thousand times more to him than his own sister. That was how things were, strange as it all seemed.

Christmas was drawing near. Martin had saved a few pence this year, and he had set his heart on

getting a drop of brandy in a medicine bottle on the sly. Little Astrid sat making a Christmas present, and if anyone asked who it was for she tossed her head and told them to go away. But one evening she did confide to Martin that it was for Elias Daber. "But he isn't a bachelor, you silly. He's an old married man, he is." As if Astrid didn't know that! But she knew too that his wife beat him, and so it might be a good thing for him to have a Christmas present for once in a way. Little Astrid said this with dignity, just as she knew Mother Lisbet would have said it.

On a dark morning of frost and still weather, long Johan Larsa came down through the village. He stooped for a handful of snow and wiped his two long knives with it. There was a certain solemnity about the great lump of a fellow, for he was on his way to Flata to slaughter a pig, and, if he knew the old woman aright, it would be a fine beast. But he was thinking of a very bad piece of news he heard yesterday from town. People had seen Gjert Knutsen being taken off from his tavern with a strait-waistcoat on—so now the fellow was in the mental hospital, no doubt. And Johan Larsa was wondering whether he ought to tell the news to Gjert's mother, or keep it quiet and let Lame Marja spread it round the village first.

Last night neither Martin nor little Astrid had slept very much, for when Johan Larsa came around slaughtering it was almost like a war, and to Martin he was no less a hero than Tordenskjold. And when the grown-ups took a lantern and went with the man over to the out-house, the children followed close at their heels. There stood the big sleigh waiting, and the knives lay all ready; and there was Martha with a

whisk in her hand and a pail to catch the blood. But Mother Lisbet stayed indoors ; she had tended the pig so long that she was sorry for it. Then the children saw Johan go into the sty and walk up to the beast, who grunted and looked most friendly ; but Johan gave it a blow on the head with an axe that stunned it and sent it rolling over, and then the men hauled it out. They put it on the sleigh, and Johan shaved off some bristles from its chest in the place where the knife was to go in ; and then the blood spurted out, and Martha whisked and whisked into the pail. Nobody must say a word. Nobody must go near the men. The two children held their breath ; Tordenskjold was in action. But in the room the dead hog was put on a door laid across two barrels, and the children waited and waited for the entrails to be taken out, so that they could get the bladder. Then Martin put a straw through the opening and blew it full of air, and, when it had been dried by the stove, the two children went out and let it fly. Look at that ! It rose higher and higher in the clear winter air ; the wind carried it away, but it went steadily up and up. At last it was lost. There was no doubt about it that by Christmas Eve it would be landed in heaven, so that the angels would have something to play with too.

In the days that followed, Astrid and Martin did a little slaughtering on their own account. Martin stunned the stool with an axe and sent it toppling over ; and Astrid was there with a pail and a whisk to catch the blood. So they, too, had plenty on their hands until Christmas time.

And Paal came home from the peat bog with a load of roots for kindling and set to work to split them up

his hat. "The same to you," said they all. To-day he sat down by the door, although at other times he went right into the room as if he belonged to the house. But Christmas was Christmas. Before he had even had a drink from the ale-bowl, Astrid stood before him with a mitten and offered it to him. They all stared at her, and Elias bent down and asked, "What is all this?"

"Christmas present," said the child bravely.

"Am I to have a mitten from you, little one?"

"Yes—you take it."

"But there's only one," said Paal, as he sat crushing tobacco stalks in his hand.

"He'll get the other next year," said the child.

At last Elias Daber took the mitten. "Well, well—many thanks; but I'm afraid I've nothing to give you." The old fellow was quite bashful; he was not used to getting presents from either children or their elders.

That evening the bachelors went out on a Christmas frolic. They all got together and started off—to come back home perhaps not till after New Year's Day. Per did not dare go with them; it was safest to mind one's p's and q's just now; for they got to know everything at Inderberg; and he would like it to come out that he had not bought as much as a drop of brandy this year. But the others rushed around in droves and were treated to meat and drink everywhere, and no one could feel sure when they wouldn't come stamping in. They came to Flata at two o'clock one morning, lit the lamp, and asked if it was true that there was such tiptop ale on tap here; and everybody, young and old, had to get up and join in the feast. Who

would have thought that Mother Lisbet would have taken it as she did ; but she too had been young in her time, and, when one of the young fellows took her on his knee and swore she was the prettiest girl in the village, she laughed till the roof rang, and the old man started to haw-haw.

And now some of the young men began parading about wearing the Christmas tokens they'd got. One went about with his hat cocked rakishly on one side, with a pair of particoloured garters stuck in it that his girl had knitted for him in the long winter evenings. Another man had been given a tassel of red, blue, and white yarn ; this he sewed on to his coat and swaggered about showing it off. A third had a pair of woollen gloves, embroidered on the back, and these he put on his hat so that everyone could see how grand they were. When sober folks went outside before going to bed in the evening, they could hear roars of laughter and shouts far away in the darkness. But Christmas was Christmas, after all, and luckily the Lord is a Lord of mercy.

Little Martin was the only one in the house that had some real brandy, though it was only a medicine-bottle full ; and God help him if the elder folk got wind of it ! But he got together some of his friends in the barn, and they sat there and drank about, keeping good watch in case anyone came. And then he and little Astrid were busy trying which of them could collect most ring-twist cakes this year ; for they had only to trot around the village and look in on people and wish them a Merry Christmas, and they were sure to get a cake, even though they were too small to be treated to a drink. No question of eating them at

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once! Oh, no!` They each had a bundle of them strung on a string, hanging under the ceiling, and the bundle grew bigger and bigger—though it was true that, when the time came to eat them after New Year, they had grown so hard from the heat of the room that you could hardly get your teeth into them.

XVIII

It was April weather again, and down in the bay lay the big Lofoten boats, telling all folks that the men had come home from the fishing. At Flata the whole floor was taken up by Pet, for Mother Lisbet was giving him such a washing-down that the soap-suds ran splashing off his back. She had a special knack at this job, and the lad puffed and blew with contentment as he bent his curly head over the tub. But the old woman was thinking all the while that perhaps this was the last time—for next year, as like as not, there would be someone else in the house who would have the first right to do it. So things went. Martha took all the clothes he had stripped off, and carried them gingerly between her fingers out into the porch for the time, for when a man had spent a winter in a fisherman's shanty it was best to be careful of his clothes till they had been boiled and washed.

The old man tramped up and down, chewing his tobacco and asking one thing and another about the fishing. What he really wanted to get at was how much the boy's share would come to; but it was too soon, yet, to touch on that—leave him alone and it would leak out in due time. He had come back with a beard, and it looked as if he didn't want a certain person to see him like that; for he was soon sitting over by the window with his shaving things and a mirror. A little tuft under the chin might just as well

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be left, but the scissors and the razor were plied without mercy on all the rest.

It was while he was sitting there stropping his razor on the flat of his hand that his mother told him the news. Martha was going to marry the widower, Helmer Spandet. Per turned his head toward her, and stared at her so hard that the old woman had to say it over again.

"Am I to believe that?" he asked, looking at his sister.

"Oh, one shouldn't believe everything one hears," she answered, growing very red in the face. But certainly she looked more neat and tidy than usual, and seemed very restless; surely there must be something in the air.

It was when he was in bed in the evening that Maitha came over and sat on his bedside. The children were fast asleep, so these two could talk things over freely.

"So you don't like it—me taking Helmer?" she began, looking toward the gleam of light from the little window.

"My good girl! It's not my business!"

"But I see well enough you don't like him."

"Well, there aren't many could like that fellow, surely?"

She sighed heavily. "Things aren't easy for me, Per."

"Do you think they'll be easier if you marry him?"

"I'll have a home, even if it's only a little one."

"And Astrid will have a father, you mean?"

At that she was silent for a little, but at last she had to come out with it.

"Oh, no! Astrid, poor little thing—it will be worse for her. She'll have to stay on here for a while—if you don't turn her out, of course."

He raised himself on his elbow. "What? Won't he let you take your child with you?"

She told him that Helmer would rather not have the child to begin with. They would have their hands so full, anyway. The ground must be broken up if there was to be food for them and their beasts; and the buildings were not finished either. And . . . and then Helmer was afraid, he said, that they might fall out about a child like that. He might want to punish her, and she be against it, and then she might cast up against him that he wasn't the father. But she was sure that, when once they had been married a little while, she would be able to bring him round. Oh, she was quite sure of that!

"That's like Helmer, that is!" said Per, with a laugh.

"He would rather pay for her, if you would let her stay here."

"Pay—he! Oh, I dare say!"

"Do you say 'no,' Per? Can't she stay?" Her voice sounded so disconsolate.

He lay down again. He thought about the people at Inderberg. They would surely have refused. Of course they would have. But as he lay there he felt, even if he were a flabby fish, he would just have to be one. She was his sister, and little Astrid couldn't be left homeless.

"I dare say the pot will go on boiling even if she does stay," said Per. "Get married if you will, girl."

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"That's good of you, Per." And she pattered across to her own bed.

She had slept little this winter. And perhaps it would not be much better later on. Little Astrid lay by her side, sleeping so snugly—the child could never dream, of course, that her mother would go away and not take her along. Things were not easy—she could weep and go on weeping, but that wouldn't make things any better. It was settled now, and she could see no other way out. God help her if she had to repent it one day.

Per had never before seen his sister as she was now. It was strange to see how a girl bustled about when she was going to get married. Every morning she found time to wash her face, and put up her heavy plaits of brown hair. Her shift was always clean, and her skirt and bodice fit for holiday wear all day and every day. She hummed about the place, and any little thing would set her laughing and singing, but often the tears came into her eyes. Every now and again she couldn't keep from stroking little Astrid's hair; then out she must go—then in again. One didn't get married every day. When Helmer Spandet came down the field she would fly to the mirror at once. The child hardly knew her these days, and took refuge when she could with Mother Lisbet. When Helmer came in she stood in a corner, and looked at him with wondering eyes.

Then, one day, Martha went. She told Astrid that she was only going out to Spandet to work; and the few things she had went with her on a wheelbarrow. There was neither bed nor chest of drawers to go with this bride; but there was a small box full of her little

again. But Gjert Knutzen was no longer at the hospital—they told Per that he had been moved over to the poor-house.

Per made shift to swallow the name of the place—and, after a while, he asked his way there. He found a tumbledown wooden building in a big, open yard with a plank fence round it. The place was full of old men and women; some lame, some deformed; most of them in the seediest old clothes, and with faces so ravaged that it was uncanny to look at them. Per asked for Knutsen, and was told that he would find him upstairs. Then he came to a long, evil-smelling passage, with a small room on the one side where two or three men sat cobbling shoes, and on the other a bigger room full of women busy with their own affairs. Two women near the door were scolding and shaking their fists at each other. "Knutsen's place is upstairs, in No. 7," a servant told Per. He went up the stairs and knocked softly at the door of No. 7; then opened it, and went in. At first he saw only a row of beds along the wall; but over by the window somebody was sitting up, reading a paper. Now he turned his head toward the door. It was Gjert.

"Ah, good day, good day!" said he, putting down his paper. "Ah—so you're back from Lofoten, Per. Come, give us your fist!"

His hair and beard had grown grey, but otherwise he was not much changed since the time Per found him in his tavern. But his eyes looked red and burnt out.

As Per sat there he remembered the times when his brother came out to the village in all his glory, strewing gifts around him to old and young. He himself had a silver chain around his neck and a watch in his pocket

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that Gjert gave him for his confirmation. Strange, indeed, the way things go ! Per took after his father ; tears came easily to his eyes, and it was all he could do now to keep his voice steady.

"Have you been here long ?" he asked.

"Oh, no—well, yes, quite a while, I fancy. Yes, come to think, it is that. But I'm as snug as possible here!" He tried to laugh ; but soon he leaned forward, and sat awhile with his face hidden in his hands.

"You must come home with me now, Gjert," Per said this as if it were only to be a visit, so afraid was he of hurting the other.

Gjert sighed. "Home. Oh, no, you can't have room for me."

"Oh, we'll find a way to make room. Are you well enough to come along on the boat ?"

Gjert shook his head and looked toward the window for a while. Then he began to talk in quite a matter-of-fact way. He would very much like to go home—oh, yes, he would like it, sure enough. He had been a rover for so long, and he was tired of seeing strange people about him. It would feel good to be among his own people again for a while. And think, just think, to be able to see Mother every day. "But it won't be for long," he said, smiling. "Oh, no. I shan't last long now, Per."

Then he remembered something. "By the way—if you really want to take in a wreck like me, there's no sense in doing it for nothing. Go and talk to the District Relief Officer. They are so overcrowded here that I'm sure he'll be thankful to get rid of me, and to pay for it into the bargain. Do that, Per ! Here, I'll find the address for you."

It took Per some time to find the Relief Office, he walked so slowly. He remembered when he had been out on the same sort of errand once before, when he had meant to ask for an allowance for the boy Martin. That time he had found he couldn't do it; it had seemed like putting up his flesh and blood for sale. He had turned back then, and he would have liked to do the same now. Gjert had put down many a shilling for them at Flata, and the least they could do now was to get him home and take good care of him. At Inderberg, no doubt, they looked differently at such things—that was their affair; he, for his part, wasn't minded to drive a bargain over his own brother.

And yet—in spite of all—he did not turn round at once; he went on very slowly, but he went on. It was curious how rich people looked in such a city; all the things they could afford. And the fine clothes they dressed themselves up in! No doubt the poor-box in a place like this must be full of money; so full that they could hardly get the lid shut. It was the town that had ruined Gjert, and, as far as that went, it wouldn't be too much if it provided for his old age now. Seen from that point of view, the whole thing seemed very different. He was quite willing to have his brother for nothing, but he had no mind to do anything for nothing for these rich people here. All this went whirling round in his head, and he stopped without knowing it. He remembered the extension, that he didn't yet see his way to getting roof and walls on—and then, just think if he could one day get his own nets, and a share in a Lofoten boat—like other folks! At last he stood before the Relief Office door. Should he turn now? Couldn't he be just as good to

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his brother even if the Poor Fund did pay him what Gjert cost them where he was now? Per stood long in two minds; but in the end he went in.

One Saturday well on in the summer Flata was in a bustle. Mother Lisbet was the only woman there now, but she had had a thorough clean up in the house; Martin had helped to scrub the floor, and even little Astrid had splashed about with a clout and pail trying to wash chairs and stools. Then the two children had been up to the uplands to fetch juniper, for the old man to cut up and strew on the floor and doorstep. Last of all, Martin had climbed up and nailed a couple of small birches over the porch, and now they had only to get themselves ready. Paal sat in his best trousers, shaving; and Mother Lisbet was plaiting her thin grey hair.

Then Per rowed out across the bay to wait for the steamer from the city. It was the same warm summer weather, the same shining fjord, as the time he went to fetch Gjert for Anna's wedding—but in other ways, to be sure, things were a little different.

There came the steamer again, with her smoke trailing in the air. She stopped as she did that other time, and Gjert fumbled his way backward down into the boat, and after him came a shabby little carpet-bag. His feet had to move so carefully, and his clothes were so threadbare; but, once down in the boat, he swung his faded hat, and bowed low to the captain on the bridge—the same captain he parted from here many years back. “Good-bye, Captain! And thanks for all your kindness.”

“Good-bye, Knutsen,” waved the captain, careful to

behave just as he did in the old days to Fetc-Knutsen.

The boat rowed shoreward up the still bay, and the two brothers sat and looked at one another. "How is Mother?"

"Oh—she's the same as usual."

"That's a good thing. But poor Father is ill, isn't he?"

"Oh, no, Father is well and hearty."

"Well, well—that's a good thing."

Here sat Gjert Knutsen in the stern again, but this time he was not going to a wedding. The village drew nearer and nearer. Oh, to be coming home again! And yet—the small houses did not beckon him as they seemed to do before; alas, he had no gifts with him. The grey home at Flata looked at him with its one eye—no doubt it thought that it had enough to bear already, and now he had come to settle there and be a burden. And to think that he once said something about pulling down the old huts and building anew! Well, well—that was an old story!

But hills and sea, the pine-ridges and the farm-lands, were all as they were before, and now he was home again. He remembered the old bearings from the time when he went fishing as a boy; the cleft in the mountains far to the south just clear of Vikaness, and the grey eastern hilltop right over Elias Daber's hut—where the two lines crossed there were fish to be had, especially if one could bait with herring. Do you remember?

The boat touched land, and Per had to help his brother out and up from the beach. They walked with short, careful steps. In the houses round about people stood looking out. "There comes Gjert!"

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they said ; and they gazed a while in silence. They remembered him as he was before ; they saw him now. They might well have expected bad weather for such a home-coming, and yet the skies were clear and blue. . . . But there, you see how things can go when the Lord wills it. You see how they go. . . . It was as if the whole village felt that Misfortune was out a-visiting.

There came Father and Mother to meet him, and the two children following after. Astrid had on her new blue dress, and her plaits were tied with a red ribbon ; she was big enough to be shy when a townsman came on a visit. "Well, Father ! Well, Mother !" Gjert swung the faded stiff hat as he did when he bade farewell to the captain, and now he shook hands with them both and bowed low. "Well, if I don't believe it's Martin ! Dear, dear ! You haven't grown much, you rascal. Come here and I'll pull you out a bit at both ends. Well, well ; I'm afraid we shan't be able to run races any more, we two. Hallo—there's a little princess here too. Heigh, heigh ! What's *your* name ? And how are you ? "

The two old ones had to wait. "Welcome home, Gjert !" said the mother at last. "Aye, you're welcome !" said Paal too. He tramped about restlessly, and his eyes grew moist as usual ; then he got annoyed, and, by way of bracing himself up, he asked angrily if there were many people on the steamer.

They walked together up toward the houses ; and Gjert noticed that one or two of the timbers in the house-wall had fallen outward, as if they couldn't hold up any longer. And yet the old grey house stood there like a mother to them all. If things go wholly

XIX

"Oh, my dear Mother, you mustn't bring me coffee and cakes every morning ; you'll ruin yourself, you know. Haven't I told you that I must have the same food as the rest of you ? There's no sense in all this."

Gjert had been given the little bedroom for himself, and here he lay for a while in the mornings, and let the time go by. He did not make much of a hole in the dishes either at dinner or supper, but when the others were eating herring or smoked fish Mother Lisbet would fry a bit of bacon for him, and she knew that the others were pleased enough for him to have it.

They had altered the window of the little room, so that he could open it and get the fresh air that towns-folk are so fond of. Through it he could see the fjord, and the long mountain ridges with their edging of snow against the sky. The summer breeze brought in to him the tang of sea and sea-beach and the scent of the meadows below the house. In the bed the straw crackled in the old, familiar way, and he could wake early in the morning and lie listening to the crying of the sea-birds. He knew their voices—that is the seagull ; there goes the sand-piper ; and that's surely an eider duck. Ah ! And, by Jove, there must be a mallard, too ! Quack ! quack ! Once in a while there came a plaintive, wailing cry high above the house—from a curlew, that had nested somewhere

up on the moors—just as it used to in the old days.

The nights were as light as day again now, and Mother Lisbet often lay awake listening, to make sure that all was well in the little room. Oh, aye ! Once on a time this boy was a shame and a misfortune ; then he grew up to be a comfort and an honour ; and now, again, he had taken refuge with his mother, as helpless as a little child. It was a strange thing about one's own children. Why must the Lord's hand lie on them so heavily ? She thought of Anna—and Martha—and now Gjert. In Christ's name, what was it they had done wrong ?

Well, she had better send up a little prayer for them, although she had already said her prayers when she was first in bed. . . . But there was Anna ; she, God help her, had another child coming—the fourth. How would she feed so many mouths ? Peter never earned a penny, and was never happy unless he was down at the farm ; and so Anna had to go about the parish baking for people. Already she had rheumatism in her joints ; for when there was baking going on in a kitchen it was best to leave the outer doors open, so that the fire would draw properly ; and so she had to work in a draught all the day long. She must be anxious about the little children, too ; for anything might happen to them. Then she would go home late in the evening, worn out after her long day of toil ; and then a new day's work began for her ; for a house must be kept going, even if it was a small one. Mother Lisbet lay there and lived through all this with Anna. Things were so ordered that a mother must bear the burdens of her child ; and yet the burdens on the child were not lightened. But

why, O God, must Anna suffer all this—she who was as good as the day is long ?

Then there was Martha. Already her man had turned his wrong side out. He wouldn't let her go home to her parents, not even on a visit. "I suppose you're going off to complain about me," he would say. "And then they'll egg you on and you'll come home still worse than you are. Never in the world." And so he forbade her to go home unless he went with her.

Why had Martha come to this ? Had she deserved it ? Mother Lisbet could not understand it.

And it was here that the evening prayer came to a sudden stop, although she was lying with folded hands. Such strange thoughts came to her again. No, no—she dared not let them in, and yet she lay there gazing at them. Was there any meaning in it all ? What if there weren't any ?

There must be ; there must ! She dared not for all the world stop believing that God was above and meant it all for the best. She dared not. If she should lose her hold on him and cease to pray, then surely everything around must crash about her ears. The village and the parish ; mountains and fjord—all would topple over into an abyss. No ! She must hold on tight, so that the world might stand fast. The children suffered, God help them, but better after all that they should bear their burden. And if she herself had borne burdens enough up till now, surely she had still the strength for more. And so it ended as so often before. She thanked the Lord for His mercy and loving-kindness. She searched out more and more blessings to thank Him for. Had she not got

Gjert home, to fuss over and care for all day long if she would? Assuredly she had endless cause for thankfulness. As she lay there, it was as though she were lifting God into ever greater and higher heavens; and her own sins became boundless, but His mercy shone over all from the first red dawn to the uttermost parts of the sea. And when at last she said the Lord's Prayer, her mind was at peace and the old face with the closed eyes shone and shone.

And on that she fell into a sleep so deep and sound that when, early in the morning, she opened her eyes to the new day, she felt almost new-born, as she hurried into her clothes and took up her work.

Gjert Knutsen was still going about in his best clothes; they were rather threadbare, perhaps, yet he looked almost distinguished in them. He tottered around the place, and looked at the skies and the village. This was where he had been washed ashore. Well, well; that was how things went. He stopped and leaned on his stick and had a talk with the hens. Curious how like that yellow one was to Lame Matja. And there was an axe—but it was not the same one they had when he was little—oh, no—that one was certainly much broader. Behind the out-house he stopped where Astrid had put up a play-hut—or, rather, a whole farm! Dwelling-house and byre were there, built of little stones, and all about on the grass sheep and cattle were grazing—shells from the beach. In the room there were two small, white stones paying a visit. Call that nothing! And here came the child herself. She began to dance about him, crying, "Catch me!" "Aye, you just look out—till I take my stick to you." "Ah! Listen to him! You don't

mean it!" And, just to tease him, she came so near that he could reach her with his stick, and he swung it, glaring at her. "Ha, ha, ha! It didn't hurt a bit. You daren't! Bae-a!" Oh, that child! The little round face could be so full of care and pains when she found his slippers for him, but this morning she was scratching the floor of the loft to make him think it was a mouse. And he had nothing in the world to give her!

He limped out to see his neighbour Sivert Rönningen; or rather Sivert's wife, Inga, his old sweetheart. He had not yet forgotten the autumn evening when they sat behind the bush together, a little apart from the other young people. It did not come to much more. And yet the little memory had remained with him. He sat there with his stick between his legs, trying to be the gay young spark he was of old. But this time he had no present with him. Oh, no! She looked at him; she laughed; she was still the same busy woman, with her home and her children. Her face was so clean-cut, and the skin so warmly pale. Was his coming still a little holiday for her? Oh, no! No doubt she sighed inwardly now as she looked at him. That was the way things went—it was indeed.

There came a day when he, too, must put on his everyday clothes, and that didn't make things easier for him. The trousers were a sorry sight, the knees and the seat both worn through, so that Mother Lisbet had to put patches on them. His clothes were a very different story once—now he could not help laughing as he looked at himself. He might be a wandering tinker by his looks; but he bowed just as low as ever

"Ah, yes, when you're ill and like to die, Mother, you may easily come to seem the only one. But unluckily one gets well again."

There was a long pause. Mother Lisbet counted the loops on her knitting-needles. Gjert sat with closed eyes, seeing himself as a young country lad in homespun standing in the kitchen of the big hotel and asking for work. First came a fat dumpy fellow with a gold chain on his waistcoat and looked him up and down ; then came the wife, so pretty and so young, in a blue dress and with silver buckles on her shoes. The boy forgot the fat man, and put out his hand to her, to show that he had learnt his manners. The gentleman made a grimace, the servants round about laughed, and the mistress blushed, but already he had taken her fine, white hand. It was the first time he held it in his.

"Did she break it off again when you got well, then?" Mother Lisbet leaned over toward him in her eagerness.

"Hm!" He smiled sadly.

He remembered the stable-boy who could not sleep at all the first night for thinking of the mistress—the mistress. She must have come down from heaven itself ; now he knew how God's angels looked. And from then onward he went about in a daze of wonder, and it lasted for days and years—days and years. To begin with, of course, he was only a boy in the stable below, and she floated about in the halls overhead.

But he met her when he slept. He dreamed that she let down a ladder to him. Are you man enough to climb so high? Aye—aye—we shall see!

So his youth went by in climbing—climbing : it

took fifteen years. But all the same, as he looked back upon them now, they seemed to him to have been short years. When once he had made his way into the salons it did not take him long to cast his slough —to take the first place among the servants, to learn languages, to become an expert in hotel business. An international world flowed through such a palace for travellers ; lords and princes, officers from visiting squadrons, famous artists. Gjert waited on so many of them, learned a little from each and all of them, made himself a new man. He soon got a taste for baths ; for fine underwear, and newly pressed clothes. As a matter of course he was good-looking, and equally of course he grew vain. It was easy now for him to come by women—but there was one who stood high above them all.

And at last . . .

She was older, to be sure, yet she was still a miracle. Her husband was alive, but that was quite another matter.

But the husband died. And how to understand what happened now ? He had only to put out his hand to take both the princess and the kingdom—but he raised his price. He had served so many years to reach her level that now he wanted it to be her turn. He took his fling. He becomes Fête-Knutsen in earnest. Oh, the many scenes he had had with her in her rooms ! . . . But then another man appeared. Was he dangerous ? Yes ! Gjert took up the challenge, but it was no good—it was too late. Then he racketed still more wildly, and one night a waterman pulled him out of the canal. Madness ! Fortunately he got pneumonia, to put an end to it all. Then she

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came, full of dismay, and made it up again. Everything was to be forgotten. They were all in all to each other. But then, unhappily, he recovered. Ah, well !

"And then you went away ?" Mother Lisbet had waited and waited for an answer.

"It was good to get out into the world a bit, yes."

"Was the other man so much better, then ?"

"Oh, dear, yes !"

"Was he handsome, too ?"

"Handsome ! A good-looking man is always a fool. No, he was an outstanding man—clever and solid."

"Was he kind, too ?"

"Kind—there's no good in that ; it's brought more than me to ruin. But if you want to be really kind, Mother, you'll not ask me any more."

Mother Lisbet sighed and got up.

Then he opened his eyes and saw the broad fjord sending its gentle waves up the bay. The scent of meadows was about him ; flies and bumble-bees hummed around. There was not a tree to be seen, either on their field or their neighbours'. A wind-racked gooseberry bush stood before the house ; it was so thick-grown that it seemed choking. "Mother," he said, before she had gone round the corner ; "as soon as I'm well enough I'll plant out that bush there—do you think I may ?"

She couldn't help laughing. If he might !

There were many women who found they had errands to Flata just now, and Lame Marja was always on the go about the village. This business of Gjert's had made a great sensation, and for a time it was as

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on they said, "Ayc—you'll take my greetings to Gjert." And now folk remembered how wonderful he was in his time; how good to his mother, and to all the others. So Lame Marja was off on her rounds again—for she was just as keen on spreading abroad good tidings as bad, so long as it only stirred folk up.

And it was just about then that the revivalist Paal Gerhard Sand came along, and shook up the village and the whole countryside.

XX

FROM topmost dale to seashore a storm of wind and thunder seemed to sweep the countryside. People flocked from leagues around to the prayer-meetings ; never had anyone heard such a preacher. No room was big enough ; the meetings had to be held in the open air, but fortunately it was summer-time. Long processions followed the speaker, singing as they went. Many gave up working, for who could know that he wouldn't be lying cold and dead to-morrow. The hour of the Lord was at hand ! Old men and women, boys and girls, all became brethren and sisters and joined the processions and sang. To-day was the accepted time ; to-morrow might be too late. Out at Klungervika a girl had been lying weeping four days and nights—it had been borne in on her that she had sinned against the Holy Ghost. If only the preacher had been able to get out there to fight the fight along with her—but there were urgent calls for him on every side. So one morning two of her brothers had to row her over to the steamer, and take her to the asylum in town.

But amid all this to-do an old man went along by the sea every day with a spade over his shoulder and a bailer in his hand. He was out digging worms to bait his lines ; for while codlings might be a bit soft in the warm summer weather, yet if they were salted in the right way you could get a little money for them in the town. Anders Inderberg's head bobbed low at every

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step, his knees were bent double ; the old man couldn't possibly have much time left him—yet he was as set as ever on laying up treasures on earth. It was different with his youngest daughter, Bergitta. After a prayer-meeting where the whole congregation had wept aloud, things went with her as with many others ; she was driven to go up before the preacher and implore a word of consolation. There stood the beautiful young girl with her fine face—and all at once Per came up and took post by her side. He bent his fair, curly head low, and wept as bitterly as his sweetheart. It was an uplifting sight, and their example gave many young people courage to do the same. She had a bad time of it when she got home ; but there was good metal in her, and every day she went to a fresh prayer-meeting, whatever the old people might say.

One Saturday evening the village was pretty well emptied of people, for the revivalist was going off by the steamer, and the whole parish streamed down to the landing-place. When they rowed him on board, he stood in the boat, stretching out his hands to all who remained behind on land.

Then the crowd broke forth into song :

“ Brethren and sisters, now we must part ;
Go now with Jesus contented of heart,
Each on his rightful way.”

And the preacher joined in from the boat, for this was a hymn he had written himself.

Most of the womenfolk had their faces buried in handkerchiefs, and sobs and cries were heard on every side. What would come of them now that he was amongst them no longer ?

stalk between his fingers. Tobacco ! He hadn't tasted it for days, for this was the only sin of the flesh he had been given to of late years, and he had thought to conquer it. " You're chewing, eh ? " he said casually.

" Yes—are you cleaned out ? "

" No ; I thought of giving it up."

A silence fell between them. The other understood, and chewed more slowly, and was almost afraid to spit.

It would have been better if they had overcome temptation, and each had gone his own way, for they were quite unable to talk about God's Word to each other, however hard they might try. But Elias plucked up courage and crossed the road ; then he shut the gate behind him and shoved his hands into his pockets.

" We're granted good weather," said Paal with a certain solemnity.

" No doubt it's not without a purpose," the other opined, looking all about him at the sky. Then they walked slowly down the field, side by side. It was so difficult to look at one another, when one knew that one could scarcely take a step without sinning. They were both in their shirt-sleeves, bareheaded and with unbuttoned waistcoats ; but even now Elias strutted a little without knowing it. They did not turn in at Flata, but went down to the sea. The evening drew in, fair and bright over mountain and fjord ; the windows of the little houses burned in the western light. Down on the beach they seated themselves on a piece of drift-timber, and looked out over the shining sea and talked things over.

sea-wash along the beach. It was cloudy weather ; the waters had an oily gleam. She passed along a green corn-field, humming and stroking one or two of the ears with her hand. Her new home lay out by the headland, grey and poverty-stricken ; but there was a task there for her to take hold of, she and Per together. Her steps went quicker without her knowing it, as she thought of all she must take upon her now. But it was bound to go well. The little fine face grew sharp with eagerness—of course it would go well.

Per came down across the field to meet her. He was on the verge of laughter, or tears, or both. “Bergitta ! ” he said. “Have you really come ? ”

“Yes, Per ! I’ve come ! ”

Up by the house stood the two old people to give her welcome ; Gjert had put on his best clothes, and he bowed low and made a little joke. Soon after, Bergitta was indoors ; yes, here she was. It was as if she at once took the whole house into her care.

The first day, of course, she was still half a visitor, though she put on a red apron over the blue cotton dress, and hung her kerchief up on the wall, and was allowed to help the old woman with a few little things. Per went in and out, his face beaming. . . . Bergitta is here ; she will stay here. He is not dreaming it ; it is *true*. She will stay at Flata to-night, to-morrow—always. He has taken her hand so often already that he dare not do it any more, but he hammers nails through empty reels, and fastens them to the wall so that she may have something to hang her clothes on. Then he takes her new boots and goes up to the kitchen-loft with them, and rubs them over carefully

with the best boot-grease. Bergitta is here. At last !

In the evening there was some little difficulty. Where was she to sleep ?—for they were not married yet. Had this been before they both found grace, the thing would doubtless have settled itself quietly, and Mother Lisbet would have been the first to shut her eyes to the arrangement. But now it was different. After the evening prayer the two of them looked at one another strangely, and Per hardly knew what to do. There was no roon she could have to herself ; Gjert had the little bedroom ; the two old people slept in the living-room ; and the loft ran undivided over the whole house. But in the loft she must sleep—she as well as he, and perhaps Per would be the worst sufferer.

Mother Lisbet went about in thought. At last she told Martin that he and Astrid must sleep together to-night ; she had made up the bed over by the chimney for them. At this the boy was furious. He was fourteen years old, and he had a little sweetheart on the sly over in the village, and now his friends would have something to tease him about if he slept in the same bed as this big girl. But of course he would have to obey.

“ Now I suppose you’ll lie there and kick me,” he said, looking furiously at Astrid.

She pursed up her lips : “ Pooh ! you look out for yourself ; more likely you’ll want me to cover you up so that you don’t get cold and go sick again.”

In the light summer night the house had grown still ; but the two children lay awake, back to back, very cross with each other. Per had lain down in his bed by one wall, and Bergitta was by the other ; they

had the floor between them. He lay looking over at her, far from happy. He could cross the floor in four or five steps ; but the Lord's eyes are wakeful. He tried to find some sort of relief by talking about holy men who took unto themselves wives ; he had read a whole book about it. It was the story of Boaz and Ruth. He began by reminding Bergitta about those two, and about Luther and his Katharina. And about Paul, who said it was better to marry than . . . well, than to find things too difficult. But in spite of all he twisted and turned in his bed and could not get to rest. . . . All those marriages excited him so. At last he took refuge again in the preacher and their conversion, for here he could, in a fashion, join himself with her.

"Bergitta!" he said, when they had been quiet for a while.

"Yes." She too was lying restless, pulling about her bedclothes.

"What was it that made you act so that day at the prayer-meeting—when you went up——?"

In a little while she answered. "Oh, it was when the preacher said : 'I dare to witness before you that I am a child of God. But think upon the day when I shall sit among the angels of heaven, and one of you shall come before God's throne without a wedding garment. Would you that I should then sing "Yea and Amen" to the judgment of damnation upon you ?'" She knew it all by heart, in the speaker's own words, it had burnt so deep into her. And now she put her hand over her eyes and moaned.

Per did the same. He too remembered the preacher's saying these words ; but now for the first

time it came really home to him. After a while he said, "Bergitta!"

"Yes."

"Suppose you sat up there, saved—and I came before the throne, and was turned away—would you sing 'Yea and Amen' to my damnation?"

"Oh, Per—you mustn't talk like that!" She sighed again and stretched herself under the covers.

But how was it possible to get around this? Earthly love assuredly counted for nothing in the Eternal Mansions. Down here, we knew, we were conceived in sin and born in iniquity, and he who looked on a woman to lust after her—oh, oh! Per felt the words of God as if they were whip-strokes. It all seemed so hopeless. Again he saw himself before the Throne, and there amongst the angels sat Bergitta with halo and wings, and now she sang "Yea and Amen"—!

Then he could stand it no longer; he must hold her in his arms while she was still a human being. "Bergitta!" he called, and it sounded like a cry of distress in the quiet night.

"Yes, Per."

"Do you think it's right that we should lie like this?"

"Come over here to me, Per." Maybe she was in no better case than he. In God's name, they must take comfort in one another while there was yet time.

So he padded the four or five steps across the floor. The children awoke. And now Bergitta and Per were lying so close together; but the eye of the Lord was still upon them, and Satan might tempt, yet he did

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not compass his end. Martin, keeping his ears pricked, could not hear so much as a kiss—but they were together, and they stroked one another so lovingly. “Ah, Bergitta!” said Per; “you mustn’t die and leave me.”

“Oh, no, we must pray that it be granted us to live together for many years.”

“You often have a cough. We must go to the doctor one day.”

“And what about you that are always at sea? It’s much more likely something will happen to you.”

“Ah! we’re in peril, one and all, wherever we go.”

“Aye, God help us—that is so.” And she stroked his face and pressed her forehead in against his shoulder.

But they neither of them dared let loose their joy at the thought that now they were to be together. The preacher, death, and the judgment still haunted their thoughts; they had each other now, but they knew it was but for a moment—their time would come in the twinkling of an eye; it might be tomorrow; it might happen to-night. . . .

“What should I do if I lost you?” Bergitta whispered, almost weeping.

“We must both go that way one day, Bergitta. But then it will all depend whether we shall meet again.”

Again they came face to face with it. The one in everlasting bliss, the other in the torment of the eternal flames. Would they not be calling across to each other, or would the one in heaven praise God because the other was to suffer anguish without end?

They stroked and patted each other; they were

together now, but they both trembled at what they saw before them. Let them cling as close as they would, it was but as the clinging of a shipwrecked man to a rock ; the sea might fling him back into the depths at any moment !

“ Oh, Bergitta, Bergitta ! ”

“ Yes, Per ; yes, Per.”

“ Shall we pray together, that we may both be saved ? ”

“ Yes, Per.”

This was their only hope of rescue ; only in this way could they bear to be so near to one another. Else all their caresses seemed only an eternal farewell —since one might go to heaven and the other to the abyss, where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

They loosed their hold on one another so that they could fold their hands. Per prayed, but he was bashful about it, and the words were little more than a whisper. Then Bergitta prayed, simply and in plain words ; with little sighs between. When they came to the Lord’s Prayer they plucked up heart, and knelt up in the bed and said it together. And after it they did not lie down again at once, but laid their cheeks together, and clasped their arms about each other’s necks.

The children were still awake.

But the day before the wedding Gjett came forward and would have it that the young couple move into the little bedroom upon returning from the altar. He would manage to clamber up to the loft. He stuck to his point till it was settled. As to the draught up there

from the chinks in the walls, by the time winter came it should be possible to make them weather-tight somehow.

Down the road there comes one day a man with fair, curly hair and beard. His hat is on the back of his head, and his toes are bursting through his shoes ; but he swings his arms and looks about on things as if the whole world were his. It is Lars Vona the fiddler—every summer he takes a trip in to his native countryside to see the wooded hills again. He looks down on Flata—sees a gathering of people, and hears the sound of psalm-singing, and asks a passer-by if it's a prayer-meeting.

"Oh ! It's supposed to be a wedding," says the man.

"Well, well, just think of that !" Lars takes another look and goes on his way. He is still living with his wife and children in their hut on a bare rock out by the sea, but the violin and clarionet have grown thick with dust of late, for people daren't dance any longer these days. Once on a time he'd make war, you might say, against the greyness and gloom that brooded over the countryside ; now he has lost the battle, and there's no more to be said. But he's still able to keep clocks in order, and people venture to trust him so far, though with some qualms.

Everyday life set in again ; and Bergitta took up her work as the young wife in the house. It was a great affair for Paal to have such a pretty young woman in the house, and he couldn't help trying to have a joke with her, when he was in a joking humour.

"Come and have a dance I" he would say; but when he took hold of her to swing her around she tore herself away, though she couldn't keep from laughing. The young folks often went up together into the barn; and if Paal asked them what they did there, they told him that they had gone apart to offer up a prayer.

"Well, see you stick to that!" he jested, trying to make them laugh. But they would both look gravely at him, and Per would say: "You should remember that you're getting old now, Father."

The old man shook his head and tried to console himself with his tobacco stalks.

The parting from Bergitta was a hard one, when Per soon after had to go off with his boat to Buvika after herring. She stood on the beach in her red apron, gazing and gazing after the boat. But every Saturday evening he came rowing mile after mile down the fjord to be with her over the night. Such a blessed thing it is to be newly married. He never forgot those lonely rows, when distances were nothing to him because he was going a-wooing to his own wife. The nights of daylight were over; sea and mountains lay in a misty blue twilight now; yellow and grey clouds gazed down from the heavens in silence; thinking, it may be, their own thoughts; and Per came rowing in silence, thinking his own thoughts too. If it were late in the night before he arrived, a lonely light shone out from the headland—there she sat and waited, not yet an angel with wings, thank God!

But the herring-fishing at Buvika was poor; and when he came home for good it was easy to see that Bergitta had something on her mind. As soon as

they were alone together she came out with it. She wanted Per to take over Flata at once ; she couldn't bear to stay on here unless she had the running of the house. "Your mother is as good as the day is long," she said ; "but nothing that she puts her hand to does well, and that's why things are as they are." Then she talked about Gjert. Good and kind as he might be, the old lady was ruining herself by coddling him and spending money on him all the time. It was easy to go to the village store and buy things on credit, but one fine day it would be Per who would have to pay the whole thing. "And if we are ever to get roof and walls on to the extension, we mustn't keep Christmas every single day. What do *you* think ? "

So Per went to his father, and the old man laughed a little and looked about him. There wasn't much to take over, but this would mean that he himself would lose the last bit of authority he had in his own house. On a little holding like this there could be no talk of pensioning off the old folks ; they would have to take the bite of food that was given them, and if they needed clothes they would have to beg the young ones for them. No doubt there would be an auction, for the two sons-in-law were sure to claim that the three children should share and share alike. That meant robbing the house of the little that was in it. But what was the use of objecting ? There would be trouble enough without that, likely.

"You must talk to your mother," said Paal, with a half laugh—but his eyes grew watery, and a little while after he had to stroll up to Elias Daber's for a bit.

It was harder for Per to break the thing to his

mother. "No," she said. "No, Per!" Was she not to work in her own hyre any more—were the cows and the sheep to be hers no longer? And inside the house she wouldn't have the least word to say any more! If she wanted to put on the coffee-kettle, even, she would have to ask leave. If one of the neighbours came in, lacking a little drop of milk, she would have none to give her! They might shear the sheep one day and set up a loom, but—others than she would settle who was to have new clothes. And that was not the worst of it. No; she was thinking about Gjert and the two children. It wouldn't be she any longer that would have the last word as to whether they were to stay or go. Were these things from now on to be decided by the old people at Inderberg?

"No," she said. "There is no hurry yet. Surely she must settle into the house first."

Per knew well enough that this was a heavy blow for her and for his father too; but he was between the devil and the deep sea. "Well, well!" he sighed, "now the thing is said."

One day Bergitta sat down to spin. "What's that to be for?" asked Mother Lisbet.

"A shirt for Per," answered Bergitta. "He hasn't too many of them."

Aye—so she was going her own way now. They were not to talk these things over any more, these two that were both so near to him!

There were prayers in the evenings now as before, but the young folks often went off by themselves into the barn with their hymn-books. They could not even share Our Lord with the old people any more.

Then one day Paal met Anders Inderberg down by

long sigh. Gjert looked at the others aghast ; but he, of course, had nothing to say.

So one day the schoolmaster was fetched to draw up the deed. He sat at one end of the long table ; the others sat around it on benches and chairs, and, although the old people could not read writing, they had put on their glasses all the same. Outside the house Gjert walked about slowly, leaning heavily on his stick ; he stopped and came back again to the house, but he could not bring himself to go in.

Around the table they had come to an agreement. Per was to take over the place, and would hold it on his father's contract with the landlord so long as the old man lived. That was the custom—and the landlord was a reasonable man. But Per had to take over his parents' debts too ; there was about twenty pounds owing at the bank, and small debts at the parish store and in the town. And against this they made over to him the two cows, the pig, and the five sheep. It was all plain enough. Paal Flata and his wife were to have free board and lodging for the rest of their days ; they were to live in the little bedroom and have peat for their fire. Lisbet would be allowed to keep two hens, and to have cream for her coffee, even when she made a little extra. The teacher looked up, and his eyes asked if this was all. The others nodded and looked at one another. No, there was clearly nothing more ! On a place like this there was nothing over to set aside for the old folks. Paal was watching for a chance to get a word in about his being given a few pence a month to buy tobacco stalks, but his courage failed him. But just then Mother Lisbet found she could not possibly keep silent any longer.

"Can't it be put down that—that Gjert shall have leave to stay here the time he has left?" she asked imploringly.

The schoolmaster looked at the others inquiringly. Per sighed—he would like to say yes! But Bergitta stepped in and said that he could stay on in any case, so long as they got on together. She, for her part, had no thought of turning him out.

"And Martin, poor boy, and Astrid?" begged Mother Lisbet again. "Can't—can't they stay on here till they're confirmed?" The young wife looked over to Per for help, and he, too, thought this was going too far.

"We can't take on more than we're able to manage, Mother," he said. "We can only do what seems possible."

Then the old people had to hold the pen while the schoolmaster signed their names; Per wrote his name under theirs, and the schoolmaster signed as witness. And now the parents had given away the little they had, and the son had promised that they should not starve to death.

It was all over.

A few days later the bailiff came to hold the auction.

There were sadly few things to sell, but the neighbours came all the same, and one or two people from the big farming district turned up, with the notion that there might be cod or herring to be had cheap. Mother Lisbet still ruled in the little bedroom, and there her kettle boiled on the stove. When she saw anyone she liked she asked them in there for a cup of coffee. Out by the long table sat the bailiff putting up the things to auction. . . . Make a bid! Sixpence is

bid ! Sixpence ! . . . Here were a few saucepans, a tin kettle, a frying-pan, a grater, trenchers and baskets, five beds with bedding, and a griddle for bannocks. People looked at the things and were loath to bid ; the old people remembered the time they themselves had to give up all they owned, and the young ones were thinking about Per, who must need all the gear, but had little money to buy with. There were few who cared to take anything away from this house.

Per stood by the table looking at the things as they were put up. They had belonged to his father and mother, they were a part of his home and his childhood. But auction debts were bad to deal with, and he dared not venture too far. He bought three beds, getting them for next to nothing ; and Anders Inderberg bought the other two. He nodded at his daughter and said they might come in useful one day. At this there were titters all around. Her three brothers were kindly buyers—they bought in a saucepan, then a couple of chairs, and then a coffee-pot. “ See here, Bergitta ! ” they said, and handed them over to her. And her sister bought dishes and plates and—“ Here you are, Bergitta ! ” she called.

But there were two sons-in-law in the house too. Peter Norset had tramped the twenty miles, and went about in his bridegroom’s coat with the two buttons at the back. This was something in his line. When anything was put up for sale, he looked as if it were a matter of life or death for him to buy it ; but it would do no good for him to bid, for it was a long time since anyone had been willing to accept a bid from him. It was different with the other son-in-law—Helmer Spandet—he was one that kept his weather eye lifting.

shillings, and, such as they were, he had a roof over his head and housing for his cattle.

But all the while a man sat on a stone a little way off, whistling softly. He had on a shiny worn suit of Sunday clothes ; he had a stick between his knees, and he gazed at the sky and the village. He couldn't bring himself to be indoors to-day ; for not a single thing could he buy either for his mother or his brother.

The wall-clock was put up for sale, and this time Martin felt it worse than anyone. He had never realised before that it was just like one of the family as it hung there on the wall ; it was something like Mother Lisbet, its face was so old and faithful. Now it was as if it, too, were being turned out of the house. Ah ! he remembered so well when Anna first taught him to read the figures on the dial. He'd have been glad to let them sell his Sunday clothes, if only it could be left to hang there in peace. But the buyer was a man from the inland parish—down came the hammer—and, soon after, the clock began to strike, as if it were crying to them all for help.

Paal Flata sat chewing, with hanging head. He was feeling very low to-day, but most of all he dreaded the moment when his shoemaker's outfit would be put up. It had so often kept him happy in bad weather, and he had been told, too, by many folks that he was a first-rate cobbler. But that son-in-law of theirs had insisted that nothing should be kept back, so no doubt it would have to go to some outsider with all the rest. And now they were bringing out the box, and the bailiff called on the folks to make a bid. There were some awls, a pair of pincers, tongs, two hammers with handles worn away by his own hands ; there were a

few brads and tacks, a piece of sole-leather, and a ball of cobblers' twine. Aye, aye! The old man did not venture to bid; he owned nothing now; his bid wouldn't be taken.

Then Helmer Spandet bid sixpence. Aye, he wanted to get hold of these things too now. But a voice from over by the door bid sevenpence. Helmer raised his bid, and there was a little struggle between him and the other, who was hidden behind some bystanders. At last they ran the lot up to a shilling, and it was knocked down to the bidder over by the door. Helmer was sulky. "Whose bid?" the bailiff asked.

"Elias Petter Daber," came the answer. The little old man came forward, took the box, and looked at Paal. "I'll just put it back in the little bedroom," he said, and out he went. Then Paal's eyes grew watery, and he had to go outside a bit and wave his arms about in the air.

A four-oared boat. What bids? But the people began to titter. For the boat was so weather-worn now, and so leaky, it would be as much as your life was worth to go to sea in it. Per got it for sixpence. And then there was nothing more.

XXI

THAT autumn great news came to the village. There were big shoals of herring in the West Channel, and the fish were staying in under the land, so that even small net-fishers could get at them and haul them up in boatfuls, if only they were on the spot. Per borrowed a big boat from the Inderberg men, took his father with him, and started out with the few nets he owned.

The West Channel was so full already of net-fishers and people from the trawlers, that the few folk who lived there could not take in any more lodgers, and Per and the old man were thankful enough to find quarters in a barn. It stood on a little cove some way from the houses, and they had to cook their food outside between two stones. They were out fishing in their boat all night along with the others, and the best part of the day they spent sleeping in the barn. The father was still a great hand at rowing, and easy to get on with, so long as he wasn't responsible for anything.

One day they had slept in the barn all day till twilight fell. Per woke first, and went out to make the coffee. He had barely got a fire going under the kettle when he heard his father scramble to his feet in the barn, and come out on to the sloping barn-bridge. The old man must have been a little muddle-headed after sleeping so long in the hay, for he seemed unsteady on his feet. All of a sudden he slipped, staggered, and fell over the edge of the bridge—a fall of more than a man's height. Per was on his feet and

over by him in a flash, but his father lay still on his face, motionless but for a slight twitching of one foot. Per dropped on his knees and shook him. "Father, what is it? Did you hurt yourself, Father?" His father did not answer. Per turned him over face upwards; and the old man just opened his eyes, looked at him, and shook his head a little; then he closed his eyes once more. "Father!" cried Per. "Father, don't you hear? You must answer me! Did you hurt yourself?" But his father only stretched himself out, and then lay still.

Per would not believe it. He went on shaking the old man, wailing "Father!" over and over again. At last he got up and stood quite still, staring blankly. Then he fetched the kettle, and threw the water on to his father's face—but the old man did not move. He felt for his father's wrist—the pulse had ceased to beat.

When at last he looked about for help, nearly all the boats had put out to sea again. In the Channel many lights shone out from the fish-buyers' boats and the trawlers, and from the farther side came the hubbub of people gutting and curing the fish. Laughter, and the songs of the womenfolk, mingled with the noise; there was all the hustle and hubbub of the herring fishery. The Channel lay still and yellow under the burning layers of cloud in the northern sky; darkness was falling and the stars coming out.

Per stood there alone with his dead father. It was no good running after people and wasting their time; no one could be of any help now. So he began to carry their things down to the shore and put them aboard the boat. He had sold their catch; the price

was low, but he had a few shillings in his breast-pocket. The nets were hanging up to dry down on the beach ; they were to have laid them ready in the boat to-night as usual and gone out to fish. Now he rolled them up and threw them in the stern, and got the boat ready for the journey home. Then he went back to his father, lying there with upturned face in the same spot, still wearing his sea-boots. Per lifted the body upright so that it seemed to be sitting. Then with one arm he took the old man round the waist, passed the other under his thighs, and, lifting him up, carried him down to the boat. He put him on top of the nets in the stern-sheets, and spread a tarpaulin over him, so that it looked as if the old man had lain down to sleep.

Then he pushed off. The mast was still up, but he expected to meet a head wind on the homeward way, so he lowered it before he took the oars. Then at last he sat down in his father's place in the bows and began to row.

There was blue darkness about them now, but in the Channel and over where the fish-curers were working there were still many lights. He had twelve long miles to cover, up the fjord and home.

He passed lights on land, and lights from houses on an island, and he glided so close by a drifter with its nets out that one of the men recognised him. "Is that you, Per ? Where are you off to now?" But Per rowed on, finding no voice to answer.

He turned the outermost headland and swung into the fjord ; blue ranges rose here on either side, each cutting a cantele out of the yellow heavens ; but they drew back again, minded, it seemed, to leave him

alone. The fjord was empty and as yellow as the sky ; no boats—not a smack or a steamer ; it might almost be that the underworld had opened and swallowed up all life. It was he alone came here, rowing with slow strokes, bringing a dead father. Scattered lights from the land on both sides stared at him and began to question him. He bore over toward the east coast ; here there was a long, lonely, impassable stretch of rock, boulder, and precipice, rising sheer from the sea, and reaching far into the skies. Here he had heard the eagle cry before a storm ; here he must pass. Under the shadow of the cliffs the sea was black ; but he did not quicken his rowing—he was out with a funeral. There might be many things out and about to-night, but he must go through with this, whatever ill they might mean him. “Father ! Now we are rowing together for the last time ! Father, what sort of son have I been to you ? ”

He had not covered half the journey yet ; he took off his south-wester and set to at the oars again. A head wind met him and blew strongly against his neck ; but he took no heed. At last a light appeared high up among the rocks ; it was only Orlottstua, a lonely little farm place that had hewn itself fast into the hillside here, and looked out over the sea. Again there came a long, eternal stretch of untrodden scree ; no matter, he still rowed slowly. In the midst of the blackest shadow an owl began to hoot. Whoo, whoo ! Ha, old one ! Do you know it already ? Yes, you’re right, I am come with a dead man. Whoo, whoo ! Whoohoo ! Aye, cry it out—cry out what a son I was to my father. Tell the western sky that, at last, I had so plundered the old man that he was

left as bare as a parish pauper. Sing it out, and I shall not give you the lie.

The oars went evenly ; the lighthouse out by the ocean was left behind like a yellow star, and now it called after him : Per is the lad that wants to get on in the world. He has been mad to get him a fine house and to have people think a lot of him. And isn't that all as it should be ? But your father didn't care a straw about all that ; he was good friends with Poverty. They got on well together, those two. His whole life long Paal was content to be an extra hand at the Lofoten fishing, without share in boat or gear, and to earn only half what the others got ; and all through his life, too, he gladly worked his stated times on the estate for a few pence a day. And when you outgrew him, Per, and began to bully him, he put up with that, too. That was what he was. But did you see him at the auction ? Do you remember that ?

It was not only the lighthouse that talked to Per to-night, for now he realised that everything around him had the whole thing pat. Western mountains and starry heavens. Sea and scree ; and the night itself, that knows all. And the Lord ? Ah, yes ! But wasn't it strange that, at the end of all, it was Father who was the chief person on this trip ? Already, no doubt, he had stood before the Judgment Seat—but those things were so strangely far off and vague. Other powers seem to awaken within him ; perhaps it was the autumn night, the sea, and the rocky cliffs that began to spirit him away into other times, when all things went a different course. Someone from a thousand years back rowed in his wake, and he and that rower were not far from being one and the same. No, no

prayers for mercy for his father, that was not the way of it ; rather Per doomed himself to atone, so that the old man might have peace in the place where now he was. His mind was haunted by the thought of a funeral pile with his father laid upon it, and he himself offering up the two cows to be burnt along with him on that same fire. That was atonement. Now the account was made up. Now would they both have peace. And here he was, rowing with such quiet strokes, without even a shiver down his back at the pagan thoughts he was thinking.

Per rowed on, and the night went by. It was still as dark as ever when he rounded the last point, and opened the hamlet at the head of the bay. There was a light from a single window only ; it seemed to be at Strand—maybe someone was sick there.

He stopped at the Flata landing, and shoved the boat in ; but he did not go ashore. His father should not stay here alone. He sat down on the back thwart to be near the old man, and rested elbows on knees and head in hands. So he sat on and on, letting the fjord and the western heavens stare him in the face. The weather was calm again ; the ripples splashed softly on the beach ; dawn must be near, but there was no hurry. It would be a long time, now, before he and his father were in a boat again together.

He heard his watch ticking, but he did not look at it. His arms were aching, stiff from the long row ; but so, no doubt, had Father's been many a time. There was a hollow dragging in his chest—he had eaten no food for over a day and a night—but doubtless his father, too, had often and often had this to bear. It was as if he leaned toward his father as he

XXII

Two small houses nestled close under the hill above the Norset farms, and although several years had gone by since they were put up, the whole place still had an unfinished look. The doors into the kitchen and the living-room had no porches to them—a thing the folks suffered for, in the winter cold particularly—the loft windows were boarded up, and the entrance to the little out-house hadn't even a bridge up to it. Assuredly, Peter Norset was a man who would set all this right sooner or later, but somehow it always got put off to a more convenient time. Anna, it was true, went on coaxing and threatening ; but one could get used to that sort of thing, and nowadays Peter scarcely heard it any longer. Besides, he had not yet quite realised that he actually belonged here ; it could never be his home. Peter Norset's home was the old farm down below—in fact, both of the farms.

When he went to work on the farms, according to his contract, he always gave the impression of being the master there. He was full of care for his two brothers' interests ; and it wouldn't take much to make him think that it was he who had built up the new farm. Nils was no doubt a stirring fellow on the land and in the smithy, but he had been, and remained, only a stripling after all. Even when Peter was not down there working, he still kept an eye on what his brothers were doing, and he often went down to them and gave them good advice. He was seldom

quite satisfied with them, although he might sometimes admit that this thing or that might really have been worse done. But it was long since Ola and Nils had felt any fear that Peter might take the farms back from them by right of succession. Now they talked to him with their tongues in their cheeks, and took him for what he was, and put up with him. He could be a strong and tough worker enough, if they only let him believe that it was he that planned the work.

But the worst thing about him was that it was so difficult to get him out of the house in the evenings. He sat there smoking and sniffing, and holding forth about everything he knew, till at last they had to remind him right out that he had a wife and children up under the hill. Aye, aye ; and so Peter Norset had to leave his own manor, and wend his way up to a cotter's hut—but it seemed to him a sort of lodging only, and so it did not trouble him much that things up there were as they were.

There was one thing that cheered Anna, however difficult things might be otherwise. When the children had gone to bed in the evening she would take her knitting and sit down by them and tell them fairy-tales. She remembered when she was little, and heard the stories from her grandmother ; and they came to life again now, and the children raised themselves on their elbows, and held their breath and listened. The stories were of little people who lived under the floor in old houses ; of sea-birds that flew about in the storm and once were men and women ; and of big pine-trees in the forests that wandered about, and visited one another at Candlemas and Christmas. “The sea, Mother ? What’s the sea like ?” They

knew nothing about the sea, of course, and it was a thing Mother could tell them all about. It was many years now since she had been there, but she could see it before her eyes as plainly as ever. She told them about the fishing-village ; about the Lofoten boats when they stood down the bay after Christmas on their long voyage, and when they came home again in from the ocean in the spring. She told them of the broad fjord in storm and calm ; of fishing-smacks and steamers, of trawling and of net-fishing. Down there the skies were so much bigger than here ; and the day was so open and wide. Her own heart grew lighter in the telling ; it was as if she took the children with her into a world where all was different from here.

Then there came word of her father's death, and that evening she sat and told the children about him : what a famous fisherman he was when he went to Lofoten as a young man ; and how, when she was a little girl, she had seen him jump over a load of hay. Story-telling was not easy work that night, to be sure ; and time and again she had to wipe her eyes and sit silent for a while.

To Peter she said that this time she must go down to the burial, even if she had to carry the youngest child on her back. Peter said he thought this was reasonable enough. "I'll look after the child," he said.

But first he had to make a trip across the uplands, and down to West Channel, where the big herring-shoals had come in. It was a day's march over moor and mountain, but he hoped to get a quarter-barrel of herrings there for next to nothing.

Long as the way was, he went off from it here and there ; for he had to get an idea of how the neighbours were managing their forests. Ah ! Just as he thought ! They were felling wastefully in many places. When he came back he would have to take a trip round, and remind them where all this must end. It was fine, though, to be out again on a tour like this. It did him good. He wandered over hill and marsh, over moor and mountain-fell. Every here and there he put up ptarmigan ; but he had no gun any longer. Then he sat down by a cairn, where he could see for leagues all round, one hill range behind another, like wave upon wave of sea. The world was vast indeed. Anna had managed to give him some food to take along, and he ate it now with a relish. A man felt almost like a bachelor on a tour like this—so easy and free in mind and body. But he had knee-boots on—the only footgear he had—and they were very heavy for a long tramp like this. All the same, they were likely better than what Anna had. Well, well ; he had better get up again and set off. As dusk was falling, he came out on the headland just above the West Channel ; and from there he looked down into a new parish. Out on the sea were steamers, smacks, and boats, and on land there was a swarm of people. Ah, there would be news to gather here, both from north and south.

He spent rather more time there than he had meant to. He found a lodging with some men from the trawlers in a boat-house, and got a bit of food from one and another of them. There were coffee and cooked food for sale, of course—but that was another matter. He got into talk here and there with girls at

work on the fish-gutting, with master-trawlers, skippers, and steamer captains—great heavens! what a lot had been happening everywhere! The quarter-barrel of herrings cost him only a few pence, but that cleaned him out; and now the question was, how could he get the fish home?

It seemed out of the question to carry it all the long way over the mountains; but if he could get it sent in to his home parish by steamer, it would be easy enough to have it brought up the dale on an empty cart. He was told that the freight would be fourpence, but that fourpence he didn't possess.

Think of a way out now, Peter!

He could not bring himself to ask utter strangers to lend him money; so he sniffed and smoked a pipe, and thought things over. But, by all the powers, hadn't he a brother who married into a farm in these parts? It couldn't be more than an hour's walk from here; so Peter started off. It would be interesting to see how things were going with Hans at this place of his.

Aye, Hans—that fellow Hans! Peter remembered this round-shouldered brother of his, always at his joiner's bench, sweating his life out to earn more and more money to put in the bank. And how hard he tried to strip Norset bare before their mother had to hand over the farm! Peter had not seen him since, and it was like enough that he wouldn't be over-welcome to-day. But we should see!

There was the farm, with its long, white dwelling-house, and red out-buildings. Wide, green fields round about; horses tethered, boats outside the boat-house down by the bay. The fellow was clearly taking toll of both sea and land. And when Peter went

down toward the houses he saw his brother standing by the road, talking with an officer in full uniform. To be sure ! There was talk of putting up a coast-guard station out here.

Peter came up and took off his hat ; Hans turned his head and started as he saw his brother. The black beard had spread all over his chest now, and it looked as though the weight of all his riches had somehow compressed him. Now he was growing red in the face. Was he ashamed of this brother in the muddy knee-boots and the wretched clothes ? Aye, to be sure, he was standing there talking to an officer—just suppose that Peter should happen to claim kindred with him.

Peter waited about until the officer had gone.
“Good day, Hans !”

The brother came a step nearer, his whole person one large question-mark ; he seemed to be saying, “What the devil do you want here ?”

“Well, how goes it, Hans ?”

“Oh, we’re all right—thanks to ourselves. And what brings you out here ?”

“Oh—I felt I must come to see you.”

The brother gaped. He had fine teeth still.

Peter gave a little laugh. He saw well enough that his brother was afraid to have him come into the farm. He was just the same as ever. He stood there now shuffling his feet restlessly, wishing Peter far enough away. Was it help he wanted—a money-loan, or security ?—whatever it was, he would say, “No, no, no !” Suppose it went abroad that this tramp here was his brother—he who was on the point of getting on to the District Council ? And that this vagabond

should turn up just as he was talking to an officer ! " What do you want ? " he said again, opening his eyes wide.

Peter was on the point of saying : " I've come to tell you that you're a dirty whelp." He would like most of all to give him a good hiding. But he thought of the herring-barrel—surely even this churl could hardly refuse him fourpence. And so he told how things were, and asked Hans to lend him the money for the freight.

At this his brother laughed. " Wasn't that just what I thought ! " he said. " It was money you were after ! "

" Do you call fourpence *money*—a rich man like you ? "

" Aye, we small folk call it money—gentry like you don't, I date say."

This was too much. Peter stuck his hands deep into his trousers pockets, and took a step toward his brother. " Dirty whelp ! " he said, and turned and strode off.

The brother stood looking after the great lanky fellow in the muddy boots. He called after him once, twice. But the other walked on. Oh, well !

But when Peter had got over his first rage he began to feel pleased that he did not get the money. Let things go as they will, he was pleased all the same ; for it left him still the superior among the brothers. And never an ill word would he say against Hans henceforth. He could lower himself to go round with a list collecting subscriptions from poor folk toward building a house, but that was something purely external ; it was a very different thing to blacken a

brother's good name. He was still the eldest brother on Norset manor, and, though he might be severe enough with his brother when it was just between themselves, that was only because he always felt responsible for them.

An hour later, Peter Norset had the herring-barrel hoisted on to his back and tied with a rope. People looked at him and smiled, and, as he plodded past the farms along the Channel, the passers-by he met stared at him. They were thinking, maybe, that this fellow wouldn't get far with such a load. They knew that newly salted herring were heavy as stone.

But Peter had it firmly fixed in his head now that he was going to put this through in spite of all the brothers in the world. Besides, he felt that he was making a kind of penitential journey again. Perhaps he was not always all he should be toward his wife and children, but at least now they should have new-salted herring on the table. When he began the upward climb he felt his back wet; the brine had leaked through, although the barrel was supposed to be water-tight. It was no light load to carry, and knee-boots are not spring-heeled shoes exactly; but upward he went. The sweat ran down, and he struggled onward. He bent well forward toward the hillside and here and there he had to crawl. It was a deceiving countryside, this; you thought you were at the top, and lo! there was a new top ahead of you, with a valley between to be crossed. And when you got to the next height it was the same all over again. The job needed patience, but he had the day before him and the night too. When he sat down for a rest he pulled out his pipe, but, lo and behold, he had run

right out of tobacco ! That made things much worse. The next time he rested he turned the pockets of his jacket and waistcoat inside out, but they were empty, although they smelled of tobacco right enough. Then he tore out a waistcoat pocket, stuffed it in his pipe, and lighted up. It was not a very joyous smoke, but at least he could blow out small clouds, and that was really the main thing.

Toward evening he was at the top. He had no food with him now, and he had sweated so much that there couldn't possibly be any more moisture left in him, so it was not so strange that he had constantly to turn aside to a brook and drink. And sure enough he was hungry—his stomach cried for food—but he patted the herring barrel each time he sat down to rest, and thought, "Well, you're not light, but it'll be good to have your herrings on the table."

And he walked and walked. It had grown dark now, but here came the moon, yellow, and round, and bland. "Aye, aye, my boy, we have been out at night before, we two !" Rocky crags rose golden ; marshes and dells sank down in blue darkness. He passed sæter huts, but the people had moved down for the winter, and the small windows gazed out most forlornly on moon and heath. Peter sat down again, dead beat, and with back and feet rubbed raw. He might hunt round in one of the sæter huts for a bite of food, but most likely there wouldn't be so much as a grain left behind. He could always lie down in one of the bunks and sleep away the night, but—He thought about it, and his eyes closed. He knew what would happen. Already he seemed to be lying there on the bunk. . . . And the door opens, and a

little old woman hobbles in, and begins to potter about with the fire on the hearth. And all at once she turns her withered face toward him and says, "Look out for that reading, you Peter ; it has made beggars of more than you." "Aye, aye, Mother—I know that song now. But it's too late ; I don't read a line these days, yet I'm a beggar all the same."

He heaved himself to his feet and went on past the steter huts. Perhaps he was a fool, but he did not want to go in there and meet the ghost of his mother.

Far on in the night he stamped into the little hut under the hillside, and Anna woke up.

"Is that you, Peter ?"

"Yes—myself and the herring," he panted, putting down the barrel in the middle of the floor.

It was no easy matter for Anna to get away. The cotter's wife who lent her a pair of shoes wouldn't have her wear them the twenty miles down to Flata and up again ; she was only to put them on for the funeral. Well, that was reasonable enough—and Peter so far outdid himself one day as to set to and make her a pair of wooden clogs, with uppers cut from a pair of old boots.

So Anna started off, with the borrowed shoes in a covered basket ; and the clogs, no foot-gear for long journeys, on her feet. It was not easy for her to leave the children—anything might happen to them—but she must leave everything in the Lord's hand ; so off she set.

She was wearing her bridal dress of black town-made cloth, with the brass brooch her mother gave her when she married, at her throat, and on her head

the kerchief that was Per's wedding present. It was not often she could dress in her best, but now, at last, she was on her way down to the sea and her old home.

She passed farms where she had often worked for a few pence a day, baking bannocks. She was rheumatic, she had lost her teeth, her waist had grown large with child-bearing, and it was not easy any longer to hold herself upright, although she was barely thirty years old.

People could not but stare at this woman, tramping so far in clogs—and the worst of it was that both heels and toes were raw long before she had gone half way. But her road was downhill ; on each side pine-ridges and mountains grew blue in the distance ; the river wound its way down, mirroring yellow tree-tops and green meadow-land. The dale broadened, the heavens grew wider. She walked on and on, and scarcely paused to rest.

Late in the day she had left the dale behind, and the world grew light and open, and the heavens great and almighty once more. Then she sat down. Here the river turned away from the highway ; it was almost a pity to part with it, for, lacking the sea, she had found comfort in looking down on it. And now she remembered that cold water is good for rubbed feet ; so she went down to the river-bank, pulled off her stockings, and put her feet in the water.

Ah, how good it was ! But when she had dried her feet on the grass and put on her stockings, she thought that now, surely, she might put on the borrowed shoes, for there were only three miles or so left. The way went through the rich farming district ; here she might meet people she knew when she was young. Her

XXIII

Now came Gjert's first winter out here in the fishing-village, and he thought himself that things might well have been much worse with him. Per went off to Lofoten ; snow lay deep and storms raged ; and there were days when the townsman dreaded the thought of going outside the door. But in the house he was afraid of being in the way—they mustn't trouble about him, for any sake ! It was a little difficult to break one's self of washing and using a toothbrush ; but the young wife had to carry all the water ; and suppose she thought he was wasteful with it ? Draughty the loft might be, but he never mentioned it, and when the youngsters complained that the snow drifted in on their beds he shook his head and said that it never drove on to *his* bed. His rheumatism could be so bad at times that the night went by and he got no sleep ; but no one need know that but himself.

He had begun to make nets for people, to keep the time from seeming so long. He sat in old Paal's patched wadmal clothes, bending over the shaking hands that tried to work, while he called up other times. It was strange that everything should be so quite at an end. There was no to-morrow any more —nothing he could look forward to. But it was possible to look back and live the old life over again. It was no good now to say, in this thing or that you should have done differently at such and such a time. That was of no use. But he was living his life in the

hotel again ; he was a stable-boy looking up to a miracle ; he got on in the world, and adventures came to him. Well, perhaps most of them were shadows, not real women. Yet some of them were as living as ever to him, and he sat here now and met them all anew. Then he was out on the seas, hurrying about in the ocean liner's gilded saloons—but all at once Mother Lisbet asked if he would like a cup of coffee, and he gave a jump, looked at his clothes, and was sitting of a sudden in a fisherman's hut that shuddered in the winter storm.

It took time for him to get used to having no ties with the world any more. He never got a letter ; he never saw a newspaper ; there were no books here but sermons and hymn-books. This one had to get used to. If anyone came in, the only talk was the gossip of the parish. This also one had to get used to.

But one day there came a parcel by post ; a bundle of old comic papers sent him by his friend the barber. Gjert smiled. He remembered the money stolen from his chest of drawers. Oh, well ! The papers were not very appetising after the many hands that had fingered them in the barber's shop. But at least there was humour to be found in them. They gave him a laugh, and laughter was rare where he was now.

One day the neighbours stood in their windows watching the district doctor drive down to Flata. "Good gracious !" they said. "Is young Martin so bad ?"

A district doctor visiting a village hut brings a certain terror with him. This one filled the doorway in his big fur coat, his glasses looked formidable, and he

asked why the devil they hadn't shovelled a pathway down from the road—he very nearly upset on the way down. The people inside were struck motionless. The mere coming of a bogey-man like this was too much for them. In he came, and his huge fur coat seemed to bring all the cold of winter along with it, so that the whole house grew ice-cold. Then he began to throw off his things ; he flung his Lapp coat on the table, the top coat came after that, and the fur cap and gloves on top of all ; but the overboots, grey with snow, he kept on. He spent some time blowing on his hands to thaw them. Well, well ; how about the invalid ? He had been moved down from the loft ; there he was in the bed over there, red head and all, coughing and gasping. The doctor sat down and began to chat ; he had the patient raised from the pillow, and started tapping him on the back and chest.

The others sat and waited and waited. Would the boy get well ? Mother Lisbet sighed softly ; most likely she was still hoping that he would at last be given grace to pass away.

"Tchah ! " said the doctor, and half looked up at the others. "Tchah ! Does he cough very often, this fellow ? " They had to admit that he did cough fairly often. "Tchah ! " he said again. No more than that. A district doctor never says a word too much.

There sat the great man with his gold spectacles, his white collar and cuffs, and his fine, well-kept hands. He had much the same effect on them as if he were the bailiff, come with a summons.

"One of you had better come along, so that we can send you over some medicine," he said at last, getting up.

in man's memory : and Per was in debt already, both for his share in the boat and his nets for the trip.

"It's easy for anyone that's young," the old woman always said ; and that was true enough. But to begin life together, with a holding that was so small, a debt so big, and the buildings as they were at Flata, was to take a burden on yourself without knowing whether you would be able to carry it. Fortunately, there were two of them ; and there was another little being coming in the spring—already it was so angry sometimes when she lifted something heavy that it kicked at her.

And then she arrived home, and she must now set to work at once to carry in water for both people and cattle. The slender little woman waded back and forth through the drifts with yoke and pails, struggling against the wind. Inside, perhaps, the others were sitting in the little bedroom being treated by the old woman to coffee and cakes. The only one she got any help from now was little Astrid. The child was both handy and quick-witted ; she was good at her school-work, and got on quickly, young as she was. Certainly she was the one that should be allowed to stay. If there were only food and clothes for them all !

Mother Lisbet had no business in the byre any more now, but the cows and sheep still lifted up their voices when they heard her footsteps outside. And she had her two hens to keep an eye on—for they might quite well go off and lay on the sly ! But sometimes when she went into the out-house, scouting and peeping, the young wife would come and keep a regular watch on her—for she, too, had hens, and she did not want to lose any of her eggs either one way or the other.

But for the most part, now, the old woman sat out in the little bedroom, sewing or knitting, with her glasses far down on her nose. It was a strange feeling to have come so far that you were nothing but a burden to the younger folks. . . . The day you pass away they will shed a tear, no doubt ; but in their inmost hearts they will feel it a great relief. . . . One good thing at least was that she had Gjert. When the poor fellow had earned half a crown by four weeks' net-making, it always went for coffee and sugar for Mother. But when they were sitting in here together having a cosy chat, they had to be careful, for the wall between them and the kitchen was thin, and the young wife was in there at her work.

That winter there was no man at Flata to do the work due for the holding on the estate ; but as soon as young Martin was well enough he had to go there every morning and drive the threshing-machine. He was paid a few pence a day for this, and his work was taken into account. But dragging himself off at five in the morning, when the weather was at its worst, was a bitter hard business for the little fellow. The doctor had said that he should keep dry and warm—well, well ! When he got up to the highroad he would stop and cry out, “ Heigh ! ”; and often an answering call came back from a cotter who had to go the same way. The boy followed through the drifts at the other's heels, coughing now and again, and making faces against the wind and weather. And, small as he was, he knew how to swear for all that !

They were white with snow when they reached their journey's end. The man went to the barn, and the boy over to the stable, where Ola, the stable-lad, was

waiting with a lantern. The two rows of farm-horses, standing with their rumps toward the gangway, threw up their heads, eager to know which one would be taken out. With some of them it was not too safe for a young boy to venture into the stall. It was a big hoist getting the heavy harness over the horse's back, and it was still worse putting on the bridle, for, of course, Lucifer threw his head up high in the air, just to spite him because he was so small. But let him just wait till he was at the mill-beam !

Then Martin went with horse and lantern through the deep snow, over to the other wing of the stable where the horsetrack was, and after him came another horse, and another boy with a lantern—a much bigger boy, of course. They harnessed the horses each to an end of the beam, and waited for a thump on the floor from the people who were threshing in the barn above, and then—hip ! heigh ! off they went, round and round ; two lanterns in the darkness ! Grey clouds of steam from both horses and boys went up into the air ; it was too cold for them to ride, so both of them tramped round behind the lanterns, each hustling on his horse.

This year Martin was to go up for confirmation, and the schoolmaster was threatening that he would not be able to pass. Who cared ? They could go to Jericho with all their books ! In the spring he would have to go out into the world and be a goatherd, and Lord knows what would happen after that. Anyway, both Mother Lisbet and Astrid would have to get on without him. They would never see him any more. At least—maybe he would write to them—no, not to Astrid, for she did nothing but make fun of his writing.

But it was queer enough to think that, after this, there wasn't a soul in the world who would bother about him. When they were resting up in the servants' quarters, the cotters did nothing but make game of him. "Dwarf!" they called him. "Carrots!" "Spotty face!" But was it his fault that he had red hair and a freckled face? No wonder he got angry! He flew at the legs of these great devils, hit out and bit, till they kicked him across the floor. "You'll end in the penitentiary!" they said. Ah, well, they'd better look out! The penitentiary couldn't be so much worse, either. They'd better just look out!

Per came back from Lofoten in the spring, but he was almost ashamed to come near his home. He owed money all round, and he had lost on this trip. He looked at the extension, still standing there waiting for walls and roof; and at the living-house wall, still bulging out; and he thought of the flour-barrel in the loft, empty by now, no doubt. Would it be any use to beg the storekeeper for more credit? But in he must go; well, well—here he was. Good day to everyone! And "Welcome!" met him from old and young, although he came with empty hands.

But, anyway, it was great to bend over the cradle, where there was a chubby little boy, with his eyes shut, looking—why, he looked like Per's own father! At this moment a new feeling came over him—there were so many in the house, it would be difficult to feed them; but three of them at least belonged together—Bergitta, the child, and himself. Out in the kitchen he hugged his wife, and felt himself rich in spite of all. "We must try to manage," he said.

"Yes, we must try," she answered, stroking his bearded face.

And Gjert still sat in the living-room, working at his nets. He was feebler than before. But he looked at the cradle with delight, lifted his finger at Per, and laughed, and shook his head. He tiptoed across the floor, even if the child was wide awake, and, if anyone was blissful when the mother trusted him to rock the cradle, it was Gjert.

The young couple were lying one night with the child between them, talking over one thing and another. Per wanted to know how the others in the house had behaved to Bergitta this last winter; and she had nothing special to complain about. But, at last, out came the story of the treating that went on in the little bedroom. "Don't they invite you in?" he questioned.

"Do you think I'd eat up their food for them?"

"Well, but don't they ask you?"

"Yes, but I say no!" And then, to be sure, Peter Norset had been here with his wallet more than once.

"But, surely, Mother has nothing to give away now?"

"The wallet was bulging, anyhow, when he went away."

Hm! Per sighed. "Well, we'll have to put a stop to that. Maybe I shall have to go about with a wallet myself one day."

They faced the thing as they lay there. They saw the mouths that opened and had to be fed. And in this house there were many more than Per and Bergitta and the child. They must set their house in order.

They no longer prayed, these two. They only

planned and talked. They had one another now; and one thing they knew—if they could not help themselves they would get no help from others.

One day Per went to the Relief Officer and said that, if he could be given a reasonable allowance for them, he was willing to keep the two children over the summer. Fine feelings must take care of themselves now. But the Relief Officer said that the boy ought to get a job as a goatherd, and the girl should go as a mother's help. No, he could not be given any money for those two.

So Per had humbled himself to no purpose; and when he came home he could hardly bear to look at the boy and girl. It was not an easy job to harden yourself.

He had barely managed to get half a sack of flour on credit from the village store—but that would not last long. At any moment the bailiff might come down on him for the bank interest. As he lay in bed at night he saw money—silver money, gold money, banknotes, and piles of copper. He hadn't it, yet people demanded it from him.

Was he to pray? He would get no money that way.

One day, as he was talking with Anders Inderberg, the old man asked innocently, scratching the back of his head, and looking up at Per, how much he got for Gjert.

Per told him. Three pounds a year. He was obliged to take it, worse luck.

"Do you think it pays?" asked the old man.

Per did not understand. Ought a man to make money out of keeping his brother?

"The City Poor Fund is rich!" said the bent old gaffer. "You ought to have five pounds—no, six pounds. He'd still be your brother all the same. A couple of pounds extra is a lot of money nowadays."

Then the old man turned away. His back said plainly that before Per came asking him for help he must first try to help himself.

That extra couple of pounds began to haunt Per. With that he could pay the bank interest, and get two sacks of flour as well. It was difficult to look at Gjert when he was thinking these thoughts. And one day he was in the city, standing before the Relief Officer once again. It was the same greybeard he had seen before; sitting behind the same desk, and wearing the same glasses—he looked at Per and lifted his eyebrows.

Per hum-ed and haw-ed a while. It was not so easy to get it out. His errand was to sell his brother, and to get as much as possible for him. Why did the fellow sit there and lift his eyebrows so? Per began to defend himself at once. His brother was quite broken down now, he said, and times were very hard for poor folk. A man who had to weigh every ounce of food in the scales knew very well what it costs. His brother was so helpless that he had to be looked after all the time. Often someone had to sit up with him all night. But three pounds wouldn't go far, and, if he couldn't get a considerable increase, he would have to say right out that he couldn't see his way to keep Gjert any longer.

Per felt as if he were choking. What was he saying about his own brother? But he saw before him the

bank interest—the two sacks of flour—the rescue from his troubles.

"I regret to say there can be no question of our allowing any more," said the man with the grey beard. "And if it is as you say, it will be better for us to take your brother back. We are a little better off for room in the workhouse now."

This was plain speaking. At any rate, so far Per had had three pounds for Gjert—and now he would lose even that.

He stood and stared at the other man. He felt a catch in his throat as he thought of this town full of rich people, that wanted to cheat him out of a few shillings. If he were sold up and thrown out of Flata one day, this bigwig would be to blame.

"Isn't the Poor Fund better off than I am?" he asked, then shut his lips tight.

"We must look at this as a matter of business, my good man," said the other. "The Poor Fund has no brother, while you have." It was like a slap in the face to Per; he stood there feeling so horribly ashamed; but at any rate that old town curmudgeon shouldn't shut him up.

"You trade on that," he said in a voice that shook. "Because a poor fisherman doesn't want to send his brother away, the Poor Fund tries to make money out of him."

"We do not trade on it. To us he is just a pauper that we are obliged to look after, and it is my duty to do it as cheaply as possible."

"Well, if you're such an inhuman lot in town here, you—you must take him back. I can't afford to spend money to make the Poor Fund richer."

"Very well, you're welcome to bring him," said the other, and he lowered his eyebrows and busied himself with his papers again.

But this time, too, Per had to go home. And Gjert looked at him, with no notion, perhaps, of what had been his business in town.

In the days that followed, Per talked to his brother as little as possible, and if they met indoors or out he glanced the other way. Gjert noticed this, and often looked questioningly at his brother.

They were sitting at table one day, eating salt fish for their dinner. Their jaws had hard work, and their hands reached out for soup, fish, and potatoes. Gjert could not eat much, and Mother Lisbet looked imploringly at Per. Couldn't he ask Bergitta to fry a piece of bacon for the poor boy?

Per understood what she wanted, but his mind went back now to all the extra food Gjert had had since he came there. It was true enough, worse luck, what old Inderberg said : it doesn't pay. You lose on it. And he thought about the bank interest, and the two sacks of flour. The Poor Fund wouldn't help. As Gjert sat there, it came to seem almost that the whole thing was his fault.

The nights were long for Per now. He saw always before him open mouths that had to be fed. He saw the extra two or three pounds that the Poor Fund and his brother wanted to cheat him of. He ought to have had the money for the past year as well if things had gone as they should. He tried to struggle with these thoughts ; he forced himself to call to mind all the kind things Gjert had done, both for him and for all the others at Flata. But it was easy enough to be

open-handed when you had plenty to give ! It was harder when want was glaring in at you through every window.

He grew ill-tempered again, both to his mother and to all in the house. They made haste to get out of his way when he came in. When they were indoors together, it felt as if a storm might burst any minute. They couldn't help staring at him, he was so changed.

For the spring work on the land he could make use of both Martin and Astrid, but Gjert only hung about, and yet had to be fed on the best. One day when Gjert came in from the little bedroom Per burst out, "I believe you'll be moving into Mother's for good, soon, Gjert ! "

His brother stood there on his weak legs, leaning on his stick. He opened his eyes wide. "My dear Per, do you mind me going in to see Mother ? "

"Well, what are you always doing there ? You must be brewing something in there together. Aren't you content here ? "

Gjert couldn't help laughing. "Am I not content ! Great Powers ! " He shook his head.

But now Per had to go on : "Well, anyway, we'd better talk the thing over, perhaps. It seems to me you'd be better off in town. It would be easier to get hold of the doctor, and I expect the food is better there, where you were before. I don't know what in the world to do, Gjert ! What do you say ? "

After a pause there came from Gjert : "Would you rather I went away, Per ? "

But Per, who had been so irritated a moment before, now felt his eyes begin to water, and could stand no more. "No, no, Gjert—but it isn't easy to be in

FOLK BY THE SEA

my shoes." And then he had to hurry out, for the thing was quite beyond him.

All that day Gjert kept going round the place, leaning on his stick. He had expected this. He had read lately, both in the young wife's eyes and in Per's, that he was in the way. And was it so strange after all? People make a fuss over you when you come one day with your hands full of gifts, and go away the next. But you mustn't linger too long. And you mustn't grow poor yourself. People get tired of being grateful —tired of being fond of one who is nothing but a burden. Gratitude to that extent is more than one's nearest and dearest can afford. The time comes when they can't even bear to look at you. That's the way things are. They cannot be otherwise.

It would be worst for Mother. Who was to go in and tell her this? At last Gjert sat down on a stone, propped on his stick. Springtime was coming again. Sea-birds on the beach; greensward; curlews crying from far over the marches. All this had been home for him too.

Into the poor-house—ah, well! Maybe the hardest thing of all would be, not that he must end his days there, but that he would not long for Flata any more.

XXIV

THAT same day Per was down by the beach looking at his boat and an old six-oar that he had bought last autumn. It was strange about such boats ; they leaned up against one another, and seemed almost to talk together. The four-oar had been at sea many a time, but winter and summer it had remained out in the open, and it was sun, storm, rain, and snow that had battered and worn it out, rather than use at sea. Now it seemed to say to the other, younger one : Things will go with you as they've gone with me. When you never get shelter in a boat-house you grow old early. It isn't work, but poverty, that wears one out.

Per looked up at the house, and it said the same thing as it stood there. It could bear witness how poverty wasted you away. And he thought about Father and Mother ; they too had known it too well. Now it would be his turn to grow old in the same way.

Still, he was young yet ; he had Bergitta and the child, and it was for him to take a grip on things and not be too much of a flabby fish.

He was quite sure now that his brother would be better off in town. He tried to believe that this was what he had most at heart, but, in fact, he smarted and chafed inwardly at the thought that the town had cheated him—cheated him for months and years on end. The rich folk in town traded on the fact that Gjert was his brother ; they were trying to enrich

themselves at his expense. What did they care about a poor fisherman? And they would like now to go on cheating him for years and years. Wasn't Bergitta too good to be treated so? And the old man at Inderberg said the other day : " When that town fellow sees that you're in earnest about bringing him back, he'll give in, soon enough, you'll see."

Well, well ; things must go as they may. Bergitta had her child and her house to grapple with ; she couldn't go on looking after sick folk for the town and getting nothing for it.

He started for the house with firm steps. Once in the room, he heard a sound of weeping from the little bedroom, and went in there. Gjert got to his feet and made himself small against the wall. The old woman looked up from her knitting and wiped her eyes : " Surely you can never mean this, Per ? "

" If I could have my way, Mother, we'd all live here together as happy as at a bridal. But soon we shan't have a bite to our mouths, and we can't ever let Gjert stay on here and starve. Surely, Mother, you know that I only want to do what's best for my brother ? "

The mother looked into space, and only sighed : " Ah, dear Lord ! "

" You mustn't take this so hard, Mother dear," said Gjert. " I'll come out and look you up again, you know."

This was an unexpected help, and Per felt relieved. " Aye, God knows you'll be welcome," he said. Then he got up. The thing was settled.

Then came some days when the old woman went about with far-off eyes, speaking very little. It was as

though she were taking counsel with something beyond the range of human sight. She did not complain ; she helped in the house, and looked calmly at everyone. But at nights, when she was in bed and all was still, she had to meet the same trial of faith that she had gone through so often before. . . . Would He help her now ? Or did He not exist at all ?

One night, when the young couple were asleep already, she stood in the doorway.

" Per ! " she said.

He woke up. " Is that you, Mother ? What's the matter ? "

" If Gjert makes twelve nets in a year it will bring in thirty shillings. And if you were to get them, Per—— ? "

He put his hand over his eyes. " Mother dear, go to bed now."

She sighed, and went out.

The next day, when they sat at table, Per looked at his mother a while. He thought she looked like the old boat on the beach, weather-worn and defenceless. And one fine day it would be his turn, and Bergitta's.

Then it was settled that Per should go to town with Gjert the next day.

There were prayers that evening as usual, but there was little heart in the singing.

And the night went by. Per did not sleep much ; he thought he could hear whispering all night through in the bedroom where his mother slept.

Gjert was up early, and in his best clothes. They had grown no less threadbare and thin ; but it would soon be summer now. He tried on the nap-worn,

stiff felt hat, though there was still some time before they were to start. The old carpet-bag was packed—there was not much to go into it. Several times he went up and down the loft stair—slowly, on his stiff legs. Sad it was that he who had once been so rich in dress shirts and collars now had nothing that was fit to wear. Mother came with a silk kerchief that had been Paal's, and tied it round his neck. He passed a brush over his hair and beard once more. He was to see the captain when he got on board.

At last he was ready. He shook hands with the young wife, made a low bow, and thanked her for his time there. He went over to the cradle two or three times, and pursed up his lips at the baby boy. Then he turned to the children, standing whimpering there, and patted them both on the head, and tried to find a joke for them. Astrid, he said, must be sure to ask him to the wedding when she got so far. And he gave Martin a little pencil, and Astrid a silver button. And then he turned toward his mother. "Ah—you are coming along," he said, smiling.

Some of the neighbours were there to say good-bye, and amongst them came Inga Rönningen, that had been in his confirmation class. A little flush spread over his face when he gave her his hand. Well, good-bye to all! Then began the journey down to the landing-stage. In the midst of the field he turned and waved his hat once more.

They were alone, the two brothers and their mother. The old woman had to blow her nose so often, it seemed she must have a cold. But as they walked along the beach she gave him little bits of advice about what to do if he should be ill, and, as so often before

when she had gone to see him off, she begged him to write—for God's sake not to forget to write. Per carried the carpet-bag. He had a silver chain round his neck, and a silver watch in his pocket that Gjert had given him at his confirmation.

The steamer called at a headland near by now, so there was not far to walk. But it was unlike Gjert quite to forget to say good-bye to his mother when he went on board the company's boat. Per did not look back, either. He was too busy helping to row.

But when the boat pushed off, both the brothers heard a voice from the beach calling, "Good-bye . . . Gjert!"

The steamer came gliding up the bay and stopped.

"Why, I really believe it's Gjert Knutsen!" said the captain from the bridge; and Gjert got up, took off his hat, and bowed as he did in the old days.

Once on board, he stood by the railing and looked back on the hamlet, while the steamer ploughed on. He saw his mother walking back along the beach—so slowly. But there came Martin and little Astrid running toward her. They had felt, maybe, that the homeward walk would be hard for her. Now they took one hand each, and led her along. But again and again she stopped, and looked after the boat.

Then a headland thrust in, and cut off one home-stead after another from his view. Soon the Flata houses would disappear. When that moment came, he took off his hat and half-unconsciously bowed in farewell.

The next day the two brothers walked into the Relief Office.

"Ah! Are you there?" said the greybeard, looking at them through his glasses.

"Yes, here we are!" said Per, answering his look defiantly, "since there's no other way!"

There was a long pause. Then the official came up to the railing, and said with a little smile: "Have you really made up your mind that you won't keep your brother if you don't get so and so much extra?"

Gjert looked at his brother, open-mouthed. Had this been discussed before?

"It's not my fault that I am so poor," said Per, unable, now, to look at either of them.

The Relief Officer turned toward Gjert. He was used to seeing many strange creatures come and go; but this threadbare figure with the courtly manners made him pause and think a while. The man could not be much over forty, but he was a wreck—he had the helplessness of a very old man.

"See here," he said to Gjert, "have you any other relatives out there at your birthplace?"

Gjert bowed. "Oh, yes—my mother."

"Then I suppose you would be glad to stay on there?"

Gjert bent his head. For a moment he saw himself in the loft at home in the winter nights, with the snow sifting in on his bed. He saw the eyes that said he was in the way. But he saw his mother too. For her sake . . . it did not matter so much about him.

"Yes, certainly, I should like that," he said hurriedly.

"Well," said the man with the glasses, "then I suppose your brother and I must try to come to some arrangement."

FOLK BY THE SEA

When they sat on board the steamer next day, going down the fjord again, it was Per, curiously enough, whose face was shining. And now it was no longer the bank and the flour-sacks he was thinking of. It was as if an invisible power had saved him from doing a thing to his brother which he might have repented all his days. Now he promised himself, and another, that if he had failed to be good to Gjert till now, he would fail no longer.

Gjert sat looking at him, and his smile was sad.

While they were away Mother Lisbet had gone about helping in the house in her usual way. It was so with her always—when a thing seemed like to crush her to earth, she only grew calmer. She held herself a little straighter and worked away in silence.

And when she rocked the child she tried to sing.

Then Astrid came tumbling in, crying, "Mother, they're coming!"

"Coming? Per?"

"Yes, but there are *two* of them! Gjert is with him."

Mother Lisbet got up, went over to the window, and looked down toward the beach. Yes, it was true—there they came both of them.

"Then I think I'll put on the kettle," she said. "I have a little coffee of my own."

But, once in the bedroom, she gazed into space with far-off eyes.

XXV

THE spring sowings were over, and the two children were not needed any more. So one day they left Flata for good, setting forth together, each with a bundle of clothes under one arm. Astrid was only eight years old, but big and strong for her age. Martin was in his sixteenth year, but little and wizened. She was going to Hjalmen to be nursemaid, and he to Helseta to herd the goats. They were going out into the world, these two, to fend for themselves from this day on.

Mother Lisbet had gone with them to the gate, and she stood and waited, thinking they would look back ; but they trudged off, one on each side of the road, quite taken up, no doubt, with wondering how things would be where they were going. They had sniffed a little, to be sure, when they said good-bye ; but Per and the others had insisted so warmly that they mustn't forget the old home, that it hadn't been so hard after all.

It was rather difficult to think of anything to say, for now they were going to part, and at such a time talk doesn't come easy. They had fought often enough, but they had slept in the same bed, and kept each other warm in the winter, when it was deadly cold ; they had played together on the beach and in the barn, and Martin had tried to be like a father to Astrid, who was so little, until she grew so big that she tried to be like a mother to him. He didn't like that at all ; and she had got conceited of late, too, because she was so much better at her books than he.

But for all that he wondered to himself how things would go with her when she got out among strangers —so young as she was. He had heard the grown-up people say that folks who wanted a servant dirt cheap should get a little girl for a mother's help. So it might well be that young Astrid would have other things to do besides looking after children ; she might have to carry water, to cook and scrub floors, to milk cows, and work as hard as a grown-up woman. The Hjalmen people were close-fisted, folks said. But they'd better look out, if they didn't behave decently to her. But he couldn't bring himself to say anything about it to Astrid just now. She had such a way of sticking her nose in the air and laughing at him.

Meanwhile Astrid trudged along on her side of the road, looking straight ahead. Her round, rosy face was full of care and thought to-day. She, too, might well have a word or two to say to him, but it wasn't quite a simple matter ; it was so easy to put this youngster's back up. They went on in silence for a while, and then she said, "D'y you remember when you pulled me in the four-wheeled carriage ?" And she laughed, looking away toward the hills. He couldn't help laughing, too.

"Yes, that was a coach, if you like !" said he. " You took to grand ways early." Then they both laughed, but they did not look at one another, and their laughter was a little shaky.

"And d'y you mind when you harnessed the cat to the sled and tried to drive us both ?"

"Aye—I dare say you think I've always been a fool, eh ?"

"Oh, no!" she assured him, with a little sigh.

At last, halfway up the Cleft, they turned about and looked back. Mother Lisbet had only just started slowly back toward the house; she must have been standing a long while, looking after them. "There's Mother," said Astrid, and began to laugh again, for fear of doing something else.

"Yes, I suppose it is," mumbled the boy, looking at the well-known figure walking downward so quietly.

"When d'you think you'll be going home again?" he asked.

"I don't know—what about you?"

Then they went on again.

She had on a new cotton dress reaching to her shoes, and on her head she wore a white kerchief, flowered in red, that the young wife had given her the day before. Martin was in grey clothes, and his red forelock bristled under the blue peaked cap he had had so many years.

She was wondering if she would get a woollen dress for the winter from the people she was to depend on now—but, if they were as close-fisted as people said, there wouldn't be much in the way of clothes coming to her. And she had more important things to think about to-day. She had told Mother Lisbet, by way of comfort, when they had been alone in the bedroom that morning, that she would try to take a run over the hills every Sunday she could get free, to meet Martin and hear him his lessons—so that perhaps he might pass the priest for confirmation after all. And Mother Lisbet had patted her head. But to talk about this to the boy himself was quite another thing.

FOLK BY THE SEA

He might quite well fly into a rage. So as she went on walking, she was thinking out crafty ways of getting the thing said.

"Are you going by the short cut over the hills?" he asked.

"Yes—are you?"

"I might as well."

They would keep together a little longer in this way; so at the top of the Clest they branched off by a path that wound up over the pine-ridges. Many a summer morning these two had been up here with the cattle—now that time was past and gone.

At the first hill-crest they turned and looked downward. There was the village, with all its grey huts along the shore; the fjord had grown great and wide, and one could see right out to where it met the sea. What a lot of ships there would be room for! And only one lonely sloop, dozing, with hanging sails! She lay there, waiting for the blue belt of breeze out by the ocean to come in-shore and reach her.

They heard sheep-bells and cattle-bells about them on the hills. "Wonder who'll come up and fetch the cows to-night," said Astrid, thinking of the home she had left.

"Well, it won't be me," he assured her.

"Nor me, either!" She laughed, but her eyes were not gay.

She had not been able to get out what she wanted to say. She thought of Mother Lisbet again—Mother was sorry for her, she knew, because she had to go out among strangers so young; but she was not frightened for her. It was different with Martin. People had all sorts of nasty things to say about him, and

Mother was afraid that he might go to the bad altogether. Astrid must try to look after him a bit—but it wouldn't be long now before their ways parted; and suppose she couldn't get out what she wanted to say?

They climbed up the next ridge, both of them silent. And now there were only a few minutes left before she must turn off west for Hjalmen. And before she quite knew where she was the time had come to shake hands and say good-bye.

They tried to laugh. "Is your bundle heavy?" he asked. "I could quite well have carried it."

"No, you've got your own."

"Well, good luck to you, then!" He looked quite fierce as he put out his hand.

"And to you, too!" The tips of their fingers barely met—they were so afraid of being too grown-up. They would have liked best to smack each other's cheeks and run right off.

"If you have to sleep with anyone over at Hjalmen," he said, "don't kick the clothes off them in the night. You always did with me."

"And don't you talk so in your sleep. You were an awful one for that!"

"Good-bye, then." He was hurrying off, for now he could not stand this any longer.

"No, wait just a little bit!"

"What else d'you want?" He stopped without looking round.

"Martin—don't be cross now."

"No; out with it!" His eyes were fixed on the hill ahead.

"Can't you come over the moors and meet me